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THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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2.4.1 Inequalities in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Devin Vartija and Saúl Martínez Bermejo

Introduction

Inequality can refer to very different areas of human life and experience, but at present it is most common to conceive of inequality as an economic indicator. Inequality usually refers to economic differences—in wealth, income, or in access to goods and services. This section aims instead to illustrate social and political inequality in early modern Europe. It analyses differences in social conditions and practices, along with inequalities of access to the political arena or to participation in government (local or general). The focus is first placed on a general description of the structural inequalities in early modern Europe and on the development of ideas of political equality up to the French Revolution. Second, the family is presented as a model of systemic inequality, and gender inequality is addressed. Lastly, Racial inequalities are discussed, though it is maintained throughout that different sources of inequality intersected and interacted in the early modern age.

Structural Inequalities in Early Modern Europe

Inequality is a more complex idea than it may seem at first sight, because it necessarily implies the concept of equality. However, a sense that all the individuals who compose a given society are or should be considered equal developed very slowly up to 1800. It may now seem obvious or natural to conceive of the world as made of individuals that, at least in theory, are equal according to central criteria such as rights, liberties, or personal choice. But the idea of equality among human beings is a sophisticated one. It did not develop overnight in Europe, nor did its arrival erase previous social practices completely.

During the Middle Ages and up to at least 1300, individuals were conceived as insufficient, incomplete or imperfect, and intermediate communities were instead seen as essential to protect and fulfil those individuals. Pre-modern Europe was, according to historian Paolo Grossi, a “society made of societies”. Around 1500, European societies were still notably fragmented. The world was to a large extent composed of families and guilds, while religious confessional identities also played a key role. Individuals belonged to different estates and corporations, and it was belonging to those groups which granted privileges and created obligations. Inequality between the privileged and the non-privileged was not only acknowledged but an integral part of the system. The social order was consistently conceived as hierarchical and vertical—rulers placed above the ruled—while images of horizontality or equality were uncommon. Inequality therefore lay at the very core of the political and social order of *ancien régime* Europe.

Several elements contributed to dissolving and changing some of the fundamentals of what historians have designated as a ‘society of orders’ or of ‘estates’. First, shifts in the anthropological conception of the individual stressed the centrality of human agency. Examples of this are a renewed attention to civic participation, and attention to the differences between human groups around the world since at least 1400. Second, during the seventeenth century, natural law theories (known also by the Latin term *iusnaturalismus*) developed. These theories conceived the origins of society by imagining an initial moment in which individuals acted or lived alone. This speculative moment, sometimes called a ‘state of nature’, was crucial to considering individuals as equals, bearers of rights, and the main agents of history—who, after the original moment, transferred their rights and power to a sovereign. Third, violent political conflicts also contributed to discussions of the established order and its very foundations. A case in point is seventeenth-century England, where political and military unrest and a strong parliament led to parallel developments in the ideas of political participation, alongside the protection of a space of liberty inherent to the subjects. Finally, the eighteenth century saw rapid increases in literacy rates in western European urban centres (with changing social conditions, increased urbanisation and the growth of manufacturing prominent among them), leading many to question the traditional basis of hierarchy. This phenomenon was captured in growing discussions about the legitimacy of inequality. The end of the eighteenth century was marked by revolutions whose aims included a complete alteration of previous notions of inequality and the development of procedures to cope with inequality.

It was precisely a controversy over how to cope with inequality that helped precipitate the French Revolution of 1789. The near-bankruptcy of the

French Crown led to Louis XVI's decision to convene the Estates-General, a representative body of the three estates of the kingdom that had last met in 1614, to acquire its approval for new taxes. The judges of France's most important court of law, the Parlement de Paris, and many members of the First Estate (the clergy) and the Second Estate (the nobility) insisted that voting should occur by estate and not by head. This would give an obvious advantage to the clergy and the nobility, even though the First and Second Estates together consisted of just over one percent of the total French population.

In *What is the Third Estate?*, a popular and fiery pamphlet published in January 1789, the non-noble clergyman Emmanuel Sieyès argued forcefully against voting by estate in the upcoming Estates-General. More importantly, he attacked the special privileges that members of the First and Second Estates enjoyed. Public office and many of the top positions in French society were open only to those of the first two estates and Sieyès was particularly enraged by the limitations placed on a person's career based purely on accidents of birth. He argued that members of the Third Estate performed all of the useful work in society but were not recognised for it: "Whatever your services, whatever your talents, you will only go so far; you will go no further. It would not do for you to be honoured." The fundamental social, political, and legal inequalities that were so deeply engrained in early modern society came to be seen as suspect by Sieyès and many others. Ultimately, when the Estates-General met in May and June 1789 and Louis XVI insisted on voting by estate and not by head, the Third Estate and a number of defectors from the First and Second refused to comply, forming what they called the 'National Assembly'. This helped transform the ongoing constitutional crisis into a revolution.

The assertion in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, drafted at the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789—that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights"—is breath-taking in its simplicity and scope. While the revolutionaries had something much less universal in mind than what this statement seems to imply, the fundamental change in worldview reflected and reinforced in this declaration continues to capture our attention and imagination. It was a world-historical turning point because, for the first time, equality became a grounding principle in a European state constitution and thus obtained fundamental political standing. Until the French Revolution, statements of equality mainly pertained to souls before God, not to human beings in the face of political authority. How this *volte-face* could have happened has occupied historians for generations, as they have sought to explain the power that equality acquired by the end of the eighteenth century in various long- and short-term developments in the shifting social, intellectual, cultural, and political fabric of early modern Europe.

The search for equality was revolutionary. However, it was also marked by very significant attempts to limit the scope of just how such equality would be applied. Notably, white men with some level of property settled in a town or city were the main beneficiaries, in theory and in practice, of ideas of equality. For the 'popular classes' – workers without recognised property, women, and all others—an unequal social system, whose basic traits had emerged and been consolidated in the Middle Ages, endured well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in many regions of Europe.

Gender Inequality and the Family

A useful example for understanding how deeply inequality was entrenched in the system is the family. Many books in many different languages were written on the administration of households and the different roles that men and women held within them. In fact, before the rise of capitalism and of strong commercial and mercantile societies, the term 'economy' referred to the rules of the household. From around 1500 to 1800 this literature and other sources depicted the family as a group of unequal individuals, within which the father held a particular type of authority over his wife, servants, and descendants. This paternal authority was hierarchical and had nothing to do with the limited, horizontal political and social relationships that could operate in the governance of cities, guilds, and parliaments. The family was a sphere that other powers were not allowed to enter. Although wives were relatively better positioned than servants and the offspring of the familial unit, the enduring effects of paternal authority underpinned many elements of the marginalisation and inequality of women.

The family was often used as a model or a metaphor to refer to the whole political structure of early modern societies. Major political thinkers, such as the French theorist of sovereignty Jean Bodin or the English theorists Robert Filmer and John Locke, reflected on the similitudes between families (organised hierarchically and inherently unequal) and different aspects of political order. Kings and rulers were often considered to extend a paternal care to their subjects, although the extent and obligations of this patriarchal authority were debated and coexisted with systems of restricted political representation (parliaments and other political bodies). Conversely, well-ordered families, with a balanced distribution of male public roles and feminine administrative activities and caring duties, were considered to be the basis of a stable social order. Religious reformers, including Puritans and more radical sects, also considered families and paternal control key to maintaining the religious foundations of such order.

Class (or status), gender, and race inequalities overlapped and intersected within this essentially unequal system. Gender inequality can be documented for the whole register of human activities, from prehistoric times to the present. Many different past European cultures had constructed gender relations hierarchically, considering the male element not only stronger, but more strongly associated with public activities and culture, while depicting the feminine element as private and linked to the realm of the natural. But even while the early modern era inherited some structural elements of gender inequality from preceding periods, the general trend in Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in fact shows some deterioration in the public involvement of women. Women continued to have virtually no access to public office, to representative bodies, or to municipal government. Moreover, some medieval examples of all-female guilds tended to disappear, as did the formal participation of women in guilds and their governing bodies. Changes in the production system during the early modern age did not benefit women either. New capitalist forms of production, including manufactures inside households, relied notably on the work of women or children, but neither received a separate income or recognition for such work. Women had more difficulties when it came to travelling, starting a business, or working for wages, and were therefore more likely to work under the authority of a household (either as wives or domestic servants). The scarce visibility of women's work was aggravated by the demands of caring and domestic occupations such as housekeeping.

Researchers such as Maria Ågren have shown that in several areas of Europe, married couples were better off in all types of business. Others have emphasised the particular position of widows, a peculiar status that offered access to otherwise restricted spheres of action, such as shopkeeping or guilds, and which placed women at the head of family units. As already mentioned, in early modern Europe inequalities in social provenance and class overlapped with gender and racial inequalities. Therefore, queens and other powerful (noble) women were often better positioned to assert their power, administer their properties and conduct politics. Despite some difficulties, aristocratic women were involved in informal power, networks of diplomacy and gift exchange, family alliances and strategies, or they influenced politics from the inside of powerful convents, for instance. However, non-aristocratic women also developed strategies of agency within the cracks of the system, negotiating their access to motherhood, re-marrying, contributing to business (from shops to artisan production), participating in colonial exploits, and producing cultural works from painting to literature.

Racial and Entangled Inequalities

Along with gender and sex, race has become one of the central categories for understanding and critiquing inequality throughout history and in the contemporary world. Importantly, it was in early modern Europe that the concept of race first gained traction, but it meant something different from how we understand the concept today. 'Race' has obscure origins, appearing in many European vernaculars by at least the fifteenth century, where it originally referred to the lineage of prized animals such as dogs and birds of prey, and soon thereafter to noble families. Race, understood to mean major groupings within the human species based on shared physical characteristics or ancestry (or both), was a seventeenth-century innovation, while the older meaning maintained dominance until at least the end of the eighteenth century. Although the nobility of the Second Estate did not consider itself distinct in physiognomy from others as the modern concept of race would imply, they did generally consider themselves 'naturally born leaders' and biologically superior. As the seventeenth-century French writer Nicolas Faret (1600–1646) stated:

Those who are well born ordinarily have good inclinations, which others only rarely have, and it seems that they come naturally to those of good birth, whereas it is only by accident that they are found in others. For in the blood flow the seeds of good and evil, which sprout in time to produce all the good and bad qualities that cause us to be loved or hated by everyone.

It is important to note that this ideal of the nobility as a closed social caste never wholly conformed with reality, because warfare, high mortality rates, and political instability made a self-reproducing and sealed-off Second Estate impossible to maintain. Ranging from as much as ten percent of the population in Eastern Europe to as little as one percent in Western Europe across the early modern period, nobles embodied and relied upon forms of inequality that evolved significantly from 1500 to 1800. They began as a wealthy, land-owning and warrior class that received special privileges such as tax exemptions. But the traditional shape of noble power was threatened by the centralisation of increasingly powerful states, the advent of capitalism, and the emergence of a humanist culture that valued civility. Some nobles were unable to adapt to this new social and political world and lost much of their wealth and power, but leading historians have shown that a great many noble families were able to accommodate themselves to the novel situation, using their wealth in obtaining a classical education and buying the venal offices that were necessary to maintain political power in a world of centralising states.

The rise of 'modern' racist or racialist views of inequality, especially white supremacy, developed slowly and in complicated ways across the

early modern period as European interaction with the non-European world intensified. During the first period of European expansion in the early modern period, known as the Columbian Exchange, Europeans did not generally use physical features to classify humanity, and thus ‘whiteness’, ‘blackness’, and so on did not yet exist as identity markers or sociological categories. Rather, language and especially religion were the most important basis for the creation of classificatory systems. Climatic theory—the idea that geography and environmental factors, broadly construed, impact physical and psychological character on the individual and the collective level—also played a role in classificatory schemes both within and beyond Europe. Such a perspective could work against the creation of fixed racial categories, as the idea that Europeans began to look and behave like the indigenous population was a very common trope from the beginning of the Columbian Exchange that lasted throughout the eighteenth century. For example, Jean-Baptiste Demanet was not unusual in reporting in his *Nouvelle Histoire de l’Afrique française* (*New History of French Africa*, 1767) that there was a colony of Portuguese settlers in west Africa who had become black over a few generations without any mixing with the indigenous population.

Religion could be involved in the creation of racialised systems, however. In what is arguably the first example of thinking in terms of heritable, and therefore ‘racial,’ inequalities in the post-classical world, the doctrine of *limpieza de sangre* (“purity of blood”) developed on the Iberian Peninsula in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a background to various discriminatory laws enacted against Jews, even against the many thousands of Jews who had converted to Christianity, known as ‘New Christians’. The hallmark of racist thinking—that a given ethnic group is inherently and inescapably inferior or suspect in some way—marked this new form of discrimination and formed part of the background to the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492.

But paradoxical as it may seem, a racist ideology of inequality did not lie behind the European imperial projects of the early modern period because these were premised on the idea that all peoples are part of a single human species with a shared ancestry who must be exposed to the teachings of Jesus Christ, and that all non-Europeans can—and should—live like Christian Europeans. Europeans required Native American knowledge to survive in the New World and learned about the many differences among Native American peoples in terms of customs, language, and history, factors that militated against the construction of an all-encompassing ‘Native American race’. And although the transatlantic slave trade and the strong racial element of New World slavery would seem to lend themselves to the creation of race as a fundamental category of inegalitarian thought, Europeans had to respect local African political authority and the myriad differences among sub-Saharan

African peoples that prevented the easy creation of a uniform 'black race'. However, with the growth of slave societies throughout the New World in the seventeenth century and especially the eighteenth century, new racist views began to develop in which blackness was identified with servility and baseness. It was the Atlantic Revolutions, during which equality acquired foundational status in the constitutions of states such as the United States, France, and Haiti, that proved the catalyst for the development of biological and often fanatical theories of fundamental inequalities, especially concerning race and sex. The incorporation of equality into state constitutions was a world-historical turning point because no other foundational document for a political community had ever promised universal equality. From that moment on, inequality required debate and explicit justification.



Fig. 1: Nicolas de Largillière, "Portrait of a Woman, Possibly Madame Claude Lambert de Thorigny (Marie Marguerite Bontemps, 1668–1701), and an Enslaved Servant MET DP312828" (1696), Wikimedia Commons (from the Metropolitan Museum of Art), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_a_Woman,_Possibly_Madame_Claude_Lambert_de_Thorigny_\(Marie_Marguerite_Bontemps,_1668%E2%80%931701\),_and_an_Enslaved_Servant_MET_DP312828.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_a_Woman,_Possibly_Madame_Claude_Lambert_de_Thorigny_(Marie_Marguerite_Bontemps,_1668%E2%80%931701),_and_an_Enslaved_Servant_MET_DP312828.jpg).

Conclusion

Looking at inequalities across the early modern period, a number of prominent developments can be discerned. Profound social changes associated with the rise of capitalism threw the inequality of social status that lay at the centre of *ancien régime* society into doubt. As we now know, capitalism is compatible with profound income inequalities but its rise across the early modern period added a novel level of abstraction to social relations, disrupting the inequality of rank that is central to all hierarchical societies. Early modern European expansion made possible both the invention of white supremacy by the eighteenth century but also the vindication of universal human rights independent of culture, sex, or race. While we live in a world of profound inequalities, especially income inequality, the basis of that inequality is fundamentally different from the early modern world, bound up as it is with ideas of social utility and merit rather than the privileges of noble birth. Studying equalities and inequalities in the early modern period remains valuable because this was a period during which deeply entrenched inequalities came to be questioned. Understanding why this was so can help us to better grapple with the social and political tensions that follow from the profound and rising inequality of our own time.

Discussion questions

1. Describe the role of the family in the development of inequalities in early modern Europe.
2. Which role did events outside of Europe play in the development of inequalities in early modern Europe?
3. Do early modern inequalities still persist in Europe today? Why or why not?

Suggested reading

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