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TITLE:

Intergenerational social mobility in Italy

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this dissertation is to elucidate the Italian social mobility pattern. A society characterized by perfect intergenerational social mobility is a society in which the chances of reaching a socioeconomic position are the same for each individual, regardless of their family background. Meaning that individual attainments are based on abilities and efforts, and these are independent from socioeconomic origins. Conversely, in a society where there is low social mobility there is a strong association to socioeconomic positions among parents and children. As a result, the specific focus is to assess the degree of mobility in the Italian society compared to other countries and pay particular attention to its specificities. The main purpose is to identify the specific factors hampering or promoting this phenomenon. When a society displays immobility it is important to analyse the reasons, as such rigidity may be due to disparities in the opportunity, obstructing a fair competition among individuals. Inequalities of outcomes are judged unacceptable if circumstances beyond individuals' control become more relevant than individuals' efforts and abilities. Additionally, the aim of the thesis is to comprehend whether such unacceptable inequalities are worrisome only for their ethical reasons or also for efficiency reasons. Moreover, it is subject to analysis whether wide inequality of income in a society might influence social mobility. Furthermore, the Italian case is studied.

In order to reach these objectives, Italy was compared with other countries, a research on the specific aspects was undertaken and the relevant theoretical literature was explored and systematized. Theoretical literature is often combined and supported by empirical evidence on the topic.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters to disentangle these diverse elements. The first chapter introduces and defines social mobility. It explains the difference between intra and intergenerational mobility, as well as the distinction between absolute and relative mobility. Only the latter concept is useful to understand the degree of openness of a society, since it reveals the presence of disparities in the chances of arriving at a certain socioeconomic destination among people from different socioeconomic origins. Then the main indicators that can be used to measure social mobility are described along with their problematic aspects. The chapter gathers the most significant

theoretical and empirical researches on cross-country trends in intergenerational social mobility with specific attention to intergenerational occupational mobility. In this way it is possible to attain an overall picture of both absolute and relative intergenerational social mobility rates in a number of countries and to identify in which position Italy is ranked. In comparison with other developed nations, Italy distinguished herself for her high rate of absolute mobility, thus representing movement across occupational class as a consequence of transformation in the occupational structure. Veritably, Italy progressed from being an agricultural economy to an industrialized and post industrialized economy. On the contrary, as far as relative mobility is concerned, Italy ranked among the least fluid societies; it established that the chances of being found in one socioeconomic position, rather than another, are not equally distributed for everybody, regardless of social origins. Italy cannot be possibly described as a fully meritocratic and open society. Undeniably, individuals' outcomes are consistently influenced by family background. Educational attainments, occupational careers and the related incomes are often influenced by parents' occupation, level of education and income, and consequentially there exists a high propensity for individuals to follow in their father's footsteps. By studying log-linear models and odds ratios, numerous studies adequately measured the advantages or disadvantages of arriving in a determinate class position related to the class of origins. Parameters indicated that currently, as historically, the class positions assumed by Italians are strongly conditioned by their classes of origin. The chances of arriving in a privileged occupational class and the risk of arriving in a disadvantaged one are strongly conditioned by the socioeconomic origins. Through such studies, Italy consistently emerged as not being a meritocratic society. The chapter concludes with a specific focus on the Italian intergenerational social mobility pattern.

Once the degree of transmission of the socioeconomic position from parents to children in the Italian society is assessed, it is then important to focus on the specific factors promoting or hampering social mobility. This is the goal of the second chapter in which social mobility is treated as a function resulting from the combination of different factors such as non-economic, institutional, economic, and the interaction of economic and social factors. An analytical study of the different factors is conducted, and empirical evidences of the Italian case are reported.

Among the non-economic factors related with the transmission of occupation across generations, there are the genetic factors and the socio cultural factors. The socio-

cultural factors consider the process in which the parental background and the local community influence individual aspirations and attainments. It became apparent that the socio-cultural environments in which children are raised affect their future development. The chapter established that individuals coming from higher educated parents have higher competencies, attend higher levels of education and excel academically, as opposed to children born from lower educated parents. In Italy, the influence of family and local community upon child development appears to be considerably relevant, also due to the fact that individuals remain for an extended period of time in the family household.

In the institutional factors, formal education plays a central role since it is the primary mechanism by which people acquire skills beyond those passed on by their family and through which they enhance their productivity. By analyzing the institutional factors, family proved to be rather influential in children educational achievements and performance. The early school tracking, that characterizes the Italian society, contributes in making family considerably influential. The presence of intergenerational educational association between parents and children in Italy is assessed and its link with future similar individual occupational careers. Italy results to display low levels of intergenerational educational mobility, thereby children tend to achieve similar levels of education of those achieved by their parents. Lowly educated and low-income families are discovered to be those investing less in education, regardless if Italy's education is public. Consequently, the attention moves to the economic factors, especially for causes that can limit investments in education such as liquidity constraints, the opportunity cost of schooling and the existence of inadequate return to human capital investments. It emerges that beyond the direct cost of schooling there exist opportunity costs of not working. Subsequently this can influence investment decisions of those with few economic resources. Less privileged parents may prefer to see their children become independent earlier on, thus tracking them into quick, or more vocationally oriented, educational lines. This is substantially more probable if there are no adequate returns to human capital investments. Much research is emphasized on education being correlated with occupation, however only moderately mediates the overall influence of social origins, such is the case of Italy. Her returns from education are insubstantially correlated with academic performances and differentiated by family background. This signifies that at parity of schooling level, family background, regardless, is also considered when entering into the labour market. The chapter concludes in analysing

the interaction among economic and social factors, especially on the role recovered by the family and the local community in influencing the individuals' entrance into the labour market. The use of informal methods is explored with consideration of their possible consequences in affecting job-worker mismatch, and the repercussions on the return from education. The uses of legal and illegal forms of family interference to enter in the Italian labour market are explored. It results to an appearance of widespread use of family ties in lowering barriers to enter in the Italian labour market. Favouritism and nepotistic practices likely affect return from education. In Italy, a so-called "hereditary clause" exists that makes it possible for the transmission of jobs from parents to children.

The third chapter dealt with the concept of social mobility related to equality and efficiency. It addresses the link between social mobility and equality of opportunity and why the extent of intergenerational mobility is relevant in assessing the degree of "openness" of a society. A society in which exist high levels of social mobility is interpreted to be a society that promotes and respects equality of opportunity. As a result, members of a society can experiment upward and downward mobility, regardless of family background, thus they fairly compete for the desired outcome, having equal chances for success or failure. The difference and the link between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome are coherently investigated. Thereby, equality of opportunity constitutes for inequality of outcomes as being acceptable, because these inequalities are mainly due to differences in efforts and preference. On the other hand, inequality of outcomes due to circumstances beyond an individual's control, are perceived to be as unacceptable. The chapter established that such inequalities are worrisome, not only on ethical grounds but also on efficiency grounds. Equality of opportunity is a basic element to have social mobility. It is further explored with regard to human capital accumulation that recovers a central role in modern societies. The specific differences between human capital accumulation and physical capital accumulation are discussed, underling the unrelated relevance of social mobility between these two concepts. It clarifies the importance of not limiting individuals' human capital investments. Since it is inherently embodied, there are physiological constraints that limit its accumulation at the individual level. If equality of opportunity is not respected, and there exist constraints in educational investments, the equilibrium result is not maximized and there can be potential loss due to non-optimally developed human resources. Subsequently, the attention considers the role of social mobility and

equality of opportunity in guaranteeing an efficient allocation of human resources in the labour market. Further attention is made to the role demonstrated by exogenous circumstance, such as family background, in the process of worker selection. Once individuals invest differently in education they will be endowed with a specific unit of productivity. If job positions are filled according to individuals' skills and merits, and external circumstances are not considered, then the allocation is efficient. It has been coherently demonstrated that in functioning and efficient systems, anonymity rules or procedures should be used in selecting the appropriate worker for a position. However, it is presented that family ties may interfere with a genuine process of worker selection, favouring people with connections over more talented workers. The possible mismatch is discussed between workers' occupational position and their productive advantages, when individuals are hired for reasons unrelated to individual productivity or capacities. Furthermore, the chapter discovered that a labour market with a non-transparent and/or non-meritocratic procedure of selections, reinforces immobility and stratification. If family background is considered, then individuals that invested in human capital accumulation might be unjustifiably refused or inappropriately rewarded. Contrarily, undeserving individuals with less talent may recover important job positions. This is regarded as one cause for job-worker mismatch, in addition to being one cause for inadequate returns from human capital investments. It has been established that if socioeconomic positions are largely influenced by family provenience it contributes in reducing incentive in human capital investments for individuals coming from both high and low socioeconomic families. This likely culminates in retarding or even arresting economic development of a modern nation.

The last section considers the trade off between equality and efficiency and explains what is meant by efficiency. Indeed, policies aimed at increasing social mobility may entail output losses. However, long-term prosperity appears to be best achieved by fostering growth and broad participation in that growth, thanks to social mobility. The chapter concludes with some considerations on the apparent effects of high levels of social mobility having on economic development, and the effect that economic development might have on social mobility. In truth, less mobile societies are likely to waste or misallocate talents. Simultaneously, rapid growth based on innovation and technology should create an environment in which the sorting of individuals should be based on capacity and not on social background. Simultaneously, the relationship of growth on social mobility is not entirely concise. It has been demonstrated that the



process of industrialization led to an increasing rate of absolute mobility. Yet for many authors it did not completely translate into relative mobility, thus exists no consistent reduction of the influence of family background having on individual outcomes. Whereas industrialization undoubtedly transformed economies across the globe, it is still debatable whether industrialized societies are also increasingly open, i.e. characterized by a greater amount of relative social mobility than unindustrialized societies.

The fourth chapter continues the study of the concept of social mobility, shifting the attention to intergenerational economic mobility in relation with inequality of income. Growth can create new opportunities, however if social mobility does not exist, then, resultantly, not all members of a society will obtain advantages from it. On the contrary, it could reinforce channels that hamper social mobility. Insight is made as to whether beyond an advanced point of income inequality could negatively affect social mobility. Wide distances between the top and the bottom levels of the society have a particular effect in producing competition among individuals as less equal, thus affecting intergenerational social mobility. To address this issue, theoretical literature on the possible correlation is analyzed. It is elucidated the relevance of income with regards to many other aspects of individual life and its connection with education and occupation. Rich families are often associated with more prestigious employment and higher levels of education. High-income households are shown to spend substantially more on their children's education than low-income households. Empirical studies on the Italian society represented the existence of a relationship between levels of education and fathers' income, with graduates having, on average, richer fathers. Moreover, families might tend to segregate themselves into economically homogenous neighbourhoods and this is a cause of intergenerational persistence. Rising income inequality may influence the opportunity structure increasing the difficulty for children from less privileged families to compete successfully against children from more privileged families. Socioeconomic inequality contributes in negatively influencing the mentality of disadvantaged individuals to not invest in education. Veritably, if individuals internalize beliefs about their own inferiority, they are likely to cut their ambitions short. Further inequality of income in the present is likely to increase the role of family background in future individuals' outcome.

Despite a casual link between the two variables not being established, the chapter reports a number of empirical studies, which try to analyze and suggest the presence of

a possible correlation between intergenerational social mobility and inequality of income. The so-called Great Gatsby Curve draws a relationship on both dimensions to establish whether current severe inequality forces family background playing a significant role in determining the adult outcomes of young people, making it more likely for a transmission of socioeconomic positions from parents to children. It demonstrates that countries with more inequality, at one point in time, also experience less income mobility across the generations. Higher degrees of inequality appears to correspond to lower chances for individuals to improve their position, in comparison to their family background. Currently inequality seems to be positively correlated with its intergenerational transmission. Italy is one of those countries in which this relation appear to be confirmed. However, a causal link between the two variables has not been established, regardless if a rough correlation exists. The literature on inequality and intergenerational mobility, for years, has developed in isolation, as a result further analysis and international comparisons could possibly shed light on this issue.

To shed light on the Italian society, both aspects are singularly studied. Doubtlessly, in terms of both income inequality and social mobility, Italy has proven to be in a rather negative situation, when compared to other nations, most of which are democratic countries with market economies. Italy appears as one of the most unequal countries in terms of income distribution and recent studies on the degree and pattern of intergenerational economic mobility in Italy assert that intergenerational persistence appears to be high and significant. Moreover, some studies discovered that the relationship between income inequality and intergenerational mobility is especially pronounced at the top and at the bottom of the income distribution. Some studies, through quintile regression or transition matrices, assessed the degree of mobility according to the different quintiles of the income distribution in the Italian society. There is evidence that stronger immobility exists among the upper quintile of sons' income distribution. The children of the very rich appear to be specially protected from downward mobility, whilst rich families appear to be more able in securing the future for their offspring.

The chapter concludes in investigating the effect that growth may have on increasing or reducing inequality and vice versa. Their relationship is not concise. Efforts to understand their relationship has yielded mixed results. It appears that there is no linear or systematic relationship. In addition, the effect that wide inequality may have on growth has also been subject for lively debate and discussion. Recent literary works

indicate the existence of a negative relationship between inequality and growth. However there is no unanimous consensus, and moreover the empirical evidence is inconclusive.

Some assertors of the argument that inequality is good for growth, point out that higher inequalities increase the stakes in the competition for good positions. This creates incentives for people to invest in more human capital, to be more motivated to try and get ahead the competition. The point is that if there is no social mobility, then there are no structures in which effort and ability are rewarded. The individual outcome is largely defined according to family provenience. As a consequence the possible positive effects of inequality on growth, without social mobility, are offset. Despite it not being possible to comprehensively establish assertion on the effect of large inequality upon growth, it is reasonable to assume that inequality traps, meaning the existence of both large inequality and immobility, represent severe constraints to future perspectives of economic development. In conjunction with inequality traps, the entire distribution is stable. Inequalities are perpetuated over time and across generations, the poor are persistently poor while the rich are persistently rich. Such a situation has been coherently proven to be damaging for economic development.

To sum up, the thesis elucidates the Italian social mobility pattern compared with other countries. It further presents that Italy cannot be possibly described as a fully meritocratic and open society. Undeniably, individuals' outcomes are consistently influenced by family background. Educational attainments, occupational careers and the related incomes are often influenced by parents' occupation, level of education and income. In studying the principal factors promoting, or hampering, social mobility lead to the discovery of the main specificities of the Italian society. Sociocultural, economic and institutional factors interplay between each other in conceiving a system not inclined to reward and to incentive individual efforts. In clarifying the relation among mobility, equality and efficiency, the fundamental distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome became apparent. It followed that only the former is fundamental to attain social mobility. If equality of opportunity is not respected, circumstances, such as family background, prevail over efforts. Inequalities due to circumstances beyond an individual's control are worrisome for both ethical reasons as well as efficiency reasons. To establish social mobility, equality of opportunity should be guaranteed in education as well as in the labour market. Equality in opportunity is proven to result in efficient human capital investments and efficient allocation of human

resources. By establishing social mobility, the results appear to be beneficial for a country's development.

Additionally, the thesis analyzed the relevance of inequality of income for social mobility. It followed that wide income inequality may negatively affect social mobility, reinforcing the relevance of circumstance over efforts. Intuitions are partially confirmed by empirical evidence. As a matter of fact, the Great Gatsby curve related the two dimensions, and concluded that countries with a greater unequal income distribution seem to be, simultaneously, the least mobile. Italy is one such country where a near identical correlation is confirmed. Inequality and immobility established the so-called "inequality trap", signifying that advantages and disadvantages are transmitted across generations and such situations have proven to be inefficient for a country's development.

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