FONDAZIONE
Istituto Internazionale di Storia Economica
"F. DATINI"
PRATO

Call for research papers 2026-2028

Poverty in preindustrial societies (12th–18th centuries)

The results of this call for research papers will be presented at Prato during the 59th Study Week (14-18 May 2028)

While poverty has always attracted the attention of economic and social historians working on preindustrial societies, it has rarely been the object of comparative studies. Over the last few years, research on poverty has somewhat intensified, mirroring, at least in part, the growing amount of attention dedicated to economic inequality. As for inequality, this is also connected to some pressing societal concerns, as not only widespread poverty remains a scourge in the developing world, but it has not been entirely eradicated from even the richest societies – on the contrary: recent crises have tended to make the prevalence of those who could be labelled "poor" increase in the western world, a tendency which has only been partially mitigated (and not everywhere) by social policies.

This also encourages reflection upon the causes of pre-industrial poverty: how far is birth the principal cause of poverty, to what extent do people fall into poverty, and can people escape poverty? What also of the mechanisms that help to confine people within poverty, including uneven access to the kinds of mechanisms (markets, capital, credit, charity etc.) that might help ease people out of poverty or confine them to a lifetime of poverty? Finally, in this respect, to what degree can historians explore inequalities even within the same broad social categories, such as "the poor", "the peasantry", "the family", etc.?

Notwithstanding the substantial interest in poverty in past and modern societies, properly comparative research has remained rather limited. The Datini Study Week intends to help fill in this gap, deepening our knowledge and understanding of the factors causing poverty in the past, of the consequences of poverty for the actual living conditions experienced by the lower strata and for lifelong outcomes, and of the extent (the prevalence) and intensity (how poor were the poor?) of poverty in different periods and societies.

A major issue to address is how to measure poverty properly. In the current literature, there are two main approaches to this problem. The first involves making use of classifications of individuals as poor (or "destitute", "derelict", "beggar", "vagabond", and all the variants employed by different European languages) provided directly by the historical sources. These definitions have to do with a situation of scarcity which often does not only involve income, but also includes wealth (not owning a house is usually a characteristic of the poor) and social connections. In this respect, we might also consider the ways in which terms such as "the poor" were applied in pre-industrial societies, including to those who were not otherwise identifiable as "poor". Regarding the historical sources providing information about who was "poor", the most systematic surely were fiscal sources of various kinds. The second approach to poverty measurement is somewhat more indirect, and involves the establishment of a poverty line, classifying as poor those who are below it, starting with some reasonable assumption about the minimum income needed to ensure physical subsistence or the somewhat higher level of consumption necessary to reach a "socially acceptable" condition. Whenever complete distributions of income or wealth are available, the poverty line can also be set in a "relative" way (usually a fraction of the median income or wealth), which allows us to look at poverty as a relative positioning in society instead of a condition based upon the impossibility to access a specific basket of goods and/or to consume a predetermined amount of calories.

More systematic attempts at quantifying poverty (variously defined) in preindustrial societies are surely to be counted among the main recent innovations in this area of research. However, beyond the definition and the measurement of poverty, there are ample opportunities for improving our knowledge of how preindustrial societies coped with it. To which degree, and how, were the poor integrated in

preindustrial societies? How did the perception of the poor change from the Middle Ages to the early modern period, and how did the Protestant Reformation affect this process? How much in the form of resources was dedicated by public institutions to support the poor, and how much was provided by private charity (and what were the ultimate intentions of the donors)? In the opposite direction, how sizeable was the attempt to control and to repress the "dangerous" poor? These are not new research questions, but they remain, to a large degree, open questions that the Datini Week will help to address.

While it can be expected that most papers will focus on Europe, the organisers welcome papers from contributors working on other world areas, in order to develop comparative understanding of the topics outlined above and below.

Papers proposed for consideration at the Datini Study Week should touch upon one or more of the following topics:

1. Measuring and defining poverty

a. What methods and definitions can be applied to the examination of pre-industrial poverty?
b. How can we quantify poverty across space and over time?
c. What causes poverty in pre-industrial society?

2. The consequences of poverty for society at large

a. Was poverty a drain on society? Is there any reason to believe that higher levels of poverty might have tended to reduce opportunities for economic growth or other forms of positive socio-economic development?
b. What is the relationship between poverty and social stability?
c. To what extent does poverty encourage different kinds of markets (credit; second-hand goods; cheap housing, etc.)?

3. The perception and self-perception of the poor

a. How are the poor defined in pre-industrial society?
b. How do the poor define themselves?
c. What are the categories of poverty: "shameful poor", working poor, beggars, widows, women without dowries, and so on?

4. The reality of poverty

a. What are the living conditions of the poor; what is available in terms of evidence, both in terms of narratives and quantification?
b. What is the relationship between poverty and socio-economic mobility: how can individuals and families escape the poverty trap?

5. The alleviation of poverty: institutions, private charity and early welfare

a. What is the role played by public institutions and by the Church in relation to the poor?
b. What role is played by the laity in support of the poor, for instance, in terms of bequests in favour of the poor, *ceppi*, hospitals and confraternities?
c. What welfare systems exist in pre-industrial societies and economies, at the level of the city / territory / state? How does this change over time?
d. What are the evident distinctions of gender and age that influence relative poverty even within the same family?
e. Is it possible to explore non-Christian charity and institutions in pre-industrial Europe?

6. The control and repression of the poor

a. In what ways are the poor castigated in pre-industrial Europe, for instance as "false" poor or "dangerous" poor?
b. To what extent are the poor identified as "lazy" and as "vagrants"?

Essential bibliography of recent works on poverty:

Alfani, G., V. Gierok and F. Schaff, "Poverty, inequality and inequality extraction: Germany fromthe Black Death until the beginning of industrialization", *Explorations in Economic History*, 95(1), 2025, pp. 1-20
Alfani, G., "Epidemics, inequality and poverty in preindustrial and early industrial times", *Journal of Economic Literature*, 60(1), 2022, pp. 3-40.
Allen, R.C., "Progress and poverty in early modern Europe", *The Economic History Review*, n.3/2003, pp. 403-443
Benito, P., Carocci, S. e L. Feller (a cura di), *Économies de la pauvreté au Moyen Âge*, Roma-Madrid: École Française de Rome-Casa de Velázquez, 2023
Dyer, C., 'Poverty and its Relief in Late Medieval England', *Past & Present*, 216 (1), 2012, pp. 41–78.
Farmer, S. (ed.), *Approaches to poverty in Medieval Europe*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2016
Healey, J., *The first century of welfare : poverty and poor relief in Lancashire, 1620-1730*, Woodbridge: Boydell, 2014.
Hitchcock , F. and McClure, J. (eds.), *The Routledge History of Poverty in Europe, c.1450-1800*, London-New York: Routledge, 2020
Luongo, A. e P. Nanni, *Prato, i Pratesi e gli enti assistenziali. Ricerche sugli ospedali e sui ceppi tra XIII e XV secolo*, Pisa: Pacini, 2020
Mollat, M. *The Poor in the Middle Ages. An essay in social history,* New York and London: Yale,1986.
Piccinni, G. (a cura di), *Alle origini del welfare. Radici medievali e moderne della cultura europea dell'assistenza*, Roma: Viella, 2020
Schaff, F., "The unequal spirit of the Protestant Reformation: particularism and wealth distribution in early modern Germany", Journal of economic growth, forthcoming
Wilkin, A., "Inequalities in access to the food market: the city as a producer of norms in the fourteenth century (Low Countries)", in D. Cristoferi (ed.), *Socio-Economic Inequalities during the Conjuncture of the Fourteenth Century. Sources and Methods, Dynamics and Representations (Italy and Europe, c. 1270-c. 1350)*, pp. 267-287, Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2025.

Expected results

The selected papers will be presented and discussed at Prato in the course of the Study Week 2028. After the discussion at the Settimana sessions, scholars should complete and revise their texts by 30 June 2028. All contributions received by the Institute will be subject to anonymous adjudication before publication.

Call for papers

Scholars are invited to send their proposal by compiling an abstract that will be reviewed by the Executive Committee**.**

The paper should represent an original contribution and be either generally comparative or a specific case-study that speaks to the larger questions set out here. Participants who are pursuing a PhD, should have completed it before the start of the conference.

Papers proposed by projects or collaborative groups that link scholars from different countries and institutions will be assessed with particular interest if they offer a comparative analysis in geographical or diachronic terms across two or more related research themes. We will also consider innovative session formats for these type of proposals.

Submission procedure

Proposals must be submitted exclusively by completing the online form available at the following link: https://tinyurl.com/format-call-2028-poverty**.**
The form must be completed and submitted no later than ~~**November 1, 2026**~~ December 6, 2026 (extended deadline).

For information or technical support during completion, please contact: datini@istitutodatini.it.
[Click here to access the submission form].

The Executive Committee will only take fully completed formats into consideration and will decide whether they have been accepted at the beginning of 2027, when authors of the selected proposals will be notified. Depending on the Institute's financial resources, at least 25 scholars will be provided with hospitality (accommodation and 10 euro meal tickets) at Prato for the Study Week. The Council may also invite up to 20 additional scholars to participate in the project without any right to hospitality or reimbursement.

The Fondazione Datini will award for the Prato conference up to 10 Travel Bursaries to cover travel costs for the conference to the maximum of 250 euros per grant for postdoctoral scholars who do not hold a full-time academic position. Applicants must send the travel bursaries form to the Fondazione Datini with their paper by **10 April 2028**. The grant will be paid during the conference on the presentation of travel receipts.

The members of the Executive Committee are: Philippe Bernardi (Parigi, President) Markus Denzel (Leipzig), Franco Franceschi (Siena), Carlos Laliena Corbera (Saragozza), Angela Orlandi (Firenze) Gaetano Sabatini (Roma) e Phillipp Schofield (Aberystwyth).

All submitted contributions must be original and not previously published or translated from previous publications.

The provisional texts of the selected contributions or at least a detailed synthesis must reach the Fondazione Datini (Datini Foundation) by **10 April 2028**. They will be put online (with protected access reserved for the participants of the project and members of the Scientific Committee) on the Institute's web pages before the Study Week in order to allow a deeper discussion of their contents.
Authors who fail to send their provisional texts to the Fondazione that day, can not be included in the final programme. In absence of the author the synthesis will be read during the conference.

At the Settimana participants will offer a summary presentation of their contribution lasting 20 minutes.
Simultaneous translation from and to Italian, English and French will be available during the Study Week.

The definitive texts of the paper, revised by the authors following the discussion (maximum 60,000 characters) must be sent to the Institute by **30 June 2028**.
They will be subject to anonymous adjudication. Texts that pass the assessment stage will be published in a special volume within a year (together with two abstracts, one in the language of the essay and the other in one of the official languages of the Institute: Italian, English, French, Spanish and German).
For the purpose of publication, texts will be accepted in Italian, French, English, Spanish and German.

Authors who are not writing in their native language are advised to have the language of their text vetted and corrected *before* submitting their paper for the assessment stage since one of the requirements for publication is that the grammar and writing style meet high academic standards.