



Income inequality in central Spain, 1690–1800[☆]

Carlos Santiago-Caballero

Department of Economic History and Institutions, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, C/Madrid 126, 28903 Getafe, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 March 2010

Available online 16 October 2010

JEL classification:

D63

N33

N53

O1

O18

Q15

Keywords:

Agrarian history

Inequality

Pressure groups

Institutions

ABSTRACT

This paper studies the evolution of income inequality in central Spain during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, taking as case study the province of Guadalajara. The first part of the paper presents the sources and the dataset that was created to estimate income inequality using grain tithes. The second section shows that through the period grain represented the lion share of total income and therefore that it can be used as a reliable proxy. The following part of the paper introduces an analysis of income inequality in the province during the period 1690–1800 and concludes that inequality decreased during the last third of the eighteenth century. Finally the paper addresses this unexpected result and concludes that it was consequence of the success of the land reform carried out by the central government in the late 1760s. The reform was a success in Guadalajara, thanks to the characteristics of its population and the lack of bargaining power of pressure groups.

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The following paper studies the evolution of income inequality in the province of Guadalajara during the period 1690–1800. There are several reasons that support the choice of Guadalajara as a case study. Like most of the regions in late 17th century Europe, Guadalajara was a typical pre-modern province characterised by an almost entire reliance on agriculture and small scale subsistence production. Its study will allow us to obtain conclusions that could easily be extrapolated to other areas of the continent with similar socioeconomic characteristics. Guadalajara is also an interesting case study given its close geographical proximity to Madrid. The capital of Spain depended heavily on the imports of grains from the surrounding regions, and Guadalajara with a surplus of grain was one of the suppliers to the city.¹ The study of Guadalajara is therefore interesting from the point of view of economic geography, to empirically examine what were the effects on inequality of a growth pole like Madrid on its surrounding areas.

A significant part of the research is based on the creation of an extensive dataset with more than 112,000 observations. Therefore the first part of the paper will present the primary sources that are used in the study, examining their origins, reliability, and the way they are used in our research. The second part of the paper will establish that grain production represented the lion share of total incomes in our sample, and therefore that it is a reliable proxy to measure income inequality. The next section will study the evolution of inequality during the period 1690–1800, to conclude that inequality between grain producers in Guadalajara diminished during the last third of the eighteenth century. This finding contradicts the traditional literature on Spanish economic history that considers the eighteenth century a period of increasing inequality. The following part of the paper

[☆] Financial support from the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation project “Explicando el desarrollo de las regiones europeas, 1850–2008” ECO2009-13331-C02-01 and from the HI-POD Project, Seventh Research Framework Programme Contract no. 225342” is acknowledged.

E-mail address: carlos.santiago@uc3m.es.

URL: http://www.uc3m.es/portal/page/portal/dpto_historia_economica_inst/profesorado/carlos_santiago_caballero.

¹ Our estimations show that in the early 1750s Guadalajara produced 750,435 fanegas of wheat and consumed 635,130, obtaining a surplus that could maintain almost 20,000 inhabitants.

will examine the dynamics of the decrease in inequality, showing that the reduction in the proportion of small peasants was the key factor. The next section will look more in depth into the changes in inequality using a Theil index taking into account three dimensions, the size of the municipality, the access to a major road and the amount of rural workers. Finally the paper will argue that the most plausible explanation to this fall in inequality was an agrarian reform carried out by the Bourbon governments that ordered the allocation of common lands owned by local councils between small producers. The intention of the government was guaranteeing the supply of food in large urban areas like Madrid, encouraging the creation of a middle class of peasants. This new social class would be wealthy enough to promote demographic growth and to constitute the economic foundations of the kingdom. In that sense the reform worked in Guadalajara, where the number of producers increased, the amount of very small producers was reduced, and population growth was sustained while it stagnated in the rest of the interior. We will conclude that the most important reason for the success of the reform in the province was the equality that existed between grain producers of Guadalajara. In line with [Engerman and Sokoloff \(2002\)](#), the lack of bargaining power from local oligarchies facilitated the development of the reform, and made possible the success of an economically efficient institutional framework.

1. Primary sources

From Old English *teotha* (tenth), the tithe represented a yearly tax that had to be paid by every producer to the ecclesiastical authorities. The first citations to the tithe can be found in the Old Testament, where according to the Genesis Abram paid the tithe to Melchizedek, the King of Salem (Jerusalem) who also occupied the charge or priest of El Elyon (“the Most High God”) (Genesis 14:18). It was a common feature in the economic framework of the middle ages and of modern European countries. In Spain the tithe survived until the *Desamortization of Mendizabal*, a process of confiscation of ecclesiastical properties led by the liberal Spanish government in 1837. During the eighteenth century the tithe paid by producers in Guadalajara represented the usual 10% of the harvest. The description of the tithes and the way the tax was defined was perfectly explained in 18th century manuscripts.

“... in this village of Alboreca there are several taxes, tithe rights and primicia that in the case of wheat, barley and oats for every ten fanegas one is paid. In the case of wool one out of ten [units], one lamb out of every ten and also one cheese out of every ten, and that in the primicia one half fanega is paid for every eleven, for all these species and also for rye and peas if they are cultivated. If that amount is not reached everything that exceeds ten will be collected until the previously mentioned eleven. And although the harvest exceeded those eleven nothing else will be paid. And if the production does not reach ten half fanegas then nothing will be paid at all from this right of primicias, understanding that this right is not performed in the case of oats, and that it is a right that is property of the priest of the parish of the mentioned village of Alboreca and as such he receives it.”²

The excellent quality of the tithes encouraged its use to analyse the evolution of agrarian production in Spain. The analysis of tithe series facilitated the publication of a significant number of regional studies in medieval and early modern times.³ However the sources used in these studies were usually obtained from the archives of the bishoprics, meaning that they are normally aggregated yearly records for the whole dioceses or shires. The richness of the *tazmia* books used in this paper allows the researcher a very detailed and unique analysis of the economic reality of grain producers in Spain. Although *tazmia* books have been used in other regions to estimate the evolution of total production over time, this is the first time that they are being used to calculate the changes in income inequality and therefore open a very promising line of research.

The *tazmia* books contain the information about the tithes paid in every parish. They are a very rich source of information for economic historians, and include detailed records about the amount of grain that was taxed by the church to every peasant in every town and village every year. This level of detail is extremely rare for early modern times, as most of the records in countries like England only kept the total amount of product taxed and not the distribution by producer. Every year after the harvest an official collector examined the amount of grain produced by every peasant and determined the 10% that had to be paid as tax. The collector was normally a neighbour of the village who therefore had local knowledge of the area he had to control. His salary was based on the amount of grain taxed, a fact that acted as an incentive to minimise the principal-agent problems between him and the ecclesiastical authorities ([Alvarez Vazquez, 1984](#):76). The Sinodal Constitutions of 1606 demanded that the tithe had to be paid from the total amount of grain produced, before extracting any sort of production costs or even the seeds required for the following harvest ([Melon Jimenez, 1987](#):181). The grain was normally examined by the collector in the same field right after the harvest, and it could not be touched or moved by the peasant until the amount to be paid was determined. The grain taxed in every parish was usually kept in a specific building where the costs that included the salary of the collector were subtracted. The grain that remained was then distributed between the local priest, the bishop, and also civil authorities. The major beneficiary was the church, obtaining the shares for the local priest and the bishop, effectively taking the lion share of the amount collected.

When all the tithes had been determined the priest wrote the *tazmia* book, a document where year after year he registered the names of all the producers and the amount taxed to each one. The original records for the year were given to the official collector, and a copy was sent to the archives of the bishop. Finally the priest included another copy of the tithes paid which were added to the books that he kept himself and that are now the manuscripts that we have used in our research. At the end of all the records in

² Catastro de la Ensenada. Book of Alboreca, pp. 241–242.

³ For example they have been used to estimate the evolution of grain production in Valencia ([Ardit Lucas, 1989](#); [Palop Ramos, 1982](#)), Malaga ([Benitez Sanchez-Blanco, 1982](#)), Basque Country ([Bilbao and Fernández de Pinedo, 1982](#)), Galicia ([Eiras Roel, 1982](#)), Segovia ([García Sanz, 1982](#)), Murcia ([Lemeneunier, 1982](#)), Toledo ([Lopez-Salazar Perez and Martin Galan, 1981](#)), Andalucía ([Ponsot, 1969](#)), Leon ([Sebastián Amarilla, 1992](#)) or Mallorca ([Vidal, 1978](#)).

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