

# **Coping with inequalities in a polycentric system: six centuries of institutional change**

## **Abstract**

We provide a model that describes the progressive closure of more affluent societies to immigration to protect the wealth of insiders. This closure took the institutional form of patrilineal property rights. We show how this institutional change can emerge locally, spread by contagion, and generate a situation where societies are locked into a gender-biased system. Only a centralized, top-down intervention could restore gender equality in property rights. This pattern is exemplified through evidence of institutional change in communities in the Italian Alps, where inheritance institutions over common property resources evolved over six centuries (1200-1800). Through historical data and a computational model, we uncover the mechanisms for a path of gradual transition from an egalitarian to a patrilineal institutional regime, followed by the sudden reinstatement of an egalitarian regime via a centralized decision.

**Keywords:** contagion; lock-in; commons; gender.

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