

Itzhak Tzachi Raz (Hebrew University Jerusalem)

‘Learning is caring: Soil heterogeneity, social learning and the formation of close-knit communities’

This paper studies the impact of social learning on the formation of close-knit communities. I focus on the settlement of the United States, during which millions of farmers migrated to new environments with unknown characteristics. Their survival depended on the ability to quickly discover the optimal farming practices. However, substantial heterogeneity of soil in their area limited the effectiveness of social learning. According to the historian Fred Shannon (1945), farmers’ inability to rely on learning from others fostered their “traditional individualism.” I provide the first empirical support to Shannon’s “Social Learning Hypothesis.”

I use detailed spatial soil data to construct a novel county-level “Soil Heterogeneity Index” (SHI) for counties in the contiguous U.S. To measure the strength of communal ties, I build on seminal contributions in social psychology (Hofstede et al, 2010; Triandis, 1995; Markus and Kitayama, 1991), which view the centrality of relationships with in-group members in individuals’ self-definition as the fundamental difference between close-knit and loose-knit societies. I follow Fryer and Levitt (2004) and construct a “Local Name Index” (LNI), which measures the strength of communal identity using children’s first names in the full count census data between 1850-1940. Then, using those measures, I establish a negative association between soil heterogeneity and close-knit communities.

I find that historically, U.S. counties with a higher degree of soil heterogeneity displayed weaker communal. I then continue to provide causal evidence on the formation of this relationship. I focus on the nineteenth century and exploit within-family variation in naming patterns in a Difference-in-Differences framework across families that migrated within the U.S. I document a decrease in the LNI of children born to farmers after they had moved to a soil-heterogeneous county, relative to the change in the LNI of farmers’ children born after a move to a soil-homogeneous county. When I examine non-farmers’ naming patterns I find no impact of soil heterogeneity on communal identification.

I then turn to study the long-run association between soil heterogeneity and culture and political preference using contemporary individual survey data and find that the impact of soil heterogeneity is long-lasting. I document a negative association between soil heterogeneity and communal morality (Graham et al., 2011) and religiosity. I also document a positive association between soil heterogeneity and support for the political left. This pattern is consistent with the substitutability of the state and the community in solving collective action problems and matches correctional evidence on the negative association between collectivism and right-wing preferences (Enke, 2019b; Enke et al., 2019).

The findings of this paper provide the first empirical support to the “Social Learning Hypothesis,” put forth by Shannon 75 years ago but received no attention in the literature that followed. This makes an important contribution to the literature on the historical roots of the Individualism-Collectivism divide (Turner, 1921; Fincher et al., 2008; Buggle, 2018, Bazzi et al., 2019; Beck-Knudsen, 2019), suggesting that, while understudied, social learning is an important determinant.