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'Like an ink blot on paper: Testing the diffusion hypothesis of mass migration, Italy 1876-1920'

Why were the poorer countries of the European periphery latecomers to the Age of Mass Migration? Despite having the highest real wages in Europe, western European countries, such as Britain and Germany, were the early leaders in transatlantic mass migration. Countries in the southern and eastern European periphery, such as Italy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Russian Empire, although far poorer, lagged behind for several decades, and surged to dominate US immigration only during the 1890s. The widely accepted explanation for this delayed migration puzzle is that mass migration depended on some prior local process of socio-economics modernization, which may include industrialization, urbanization, and rise in demographic pressures. We refer to this explanation as the *internalist view*. A minority view, which we refer to as the *diffusion hypothesis*, argues that mass migration was delayed by a lack of exposure to migration networks, and that the geographic expansion of these networks in a process of spatial diffusion was the main factor that eventually unleashed mass migration. Although this hypothesis can resolve a number of inconsistencies in the currently dominant view, it had never been brought to a rigorous test.

In this paper we develop a theoretical framework that enables differentiating between the two competing hypotheses based on a series of empirical predictions: (a) *convergence* in rates of emigration across communes; (b) An *S-shaped* time-series pattern of emigration rates within communes; (c) *frontier effect*, whereby mass emigration erupts primarily in close proximity to the recent frontier of mass emigration; and (d) *correlated destinations*, a pattern by which correlation in migration destinations between places of origin is diminishing with distance between them and declines over time. Focusing on post-unification Italy, we construct a comprehensive commune- and district-level panel of annual emigration data over four decades (1876/1884-1920) and more than 8,000 communes. We develop a new set of stylized facts on Italian emigration that are consistent with the four main predictions of the diffusion hypothesis. We show that Italian mass migration to North America began in a few separate epicenters and expanded from there in an orderly pattern of spatial expansion. Finally, we develop a new instrumental variable strategy, exploiting exogenous variation in the distribution of population over space, to confirm the main mechanism of the diffusion hypothesis, that lagged emigration of neighboring communes *caused* own current emigration. These findings strongly support the diffusion hypothesis, and call for a revision of our understanding of one of the most important features of the Age of Mass Migration—the delayed migration puzzle.