

Title: Like an Ink Blot on Paper: Testing the Diffusion Hypothesis of Mass Migration, Italy 1876-1920 (Joint with Ariell Zimran)

Abstract

Why were the poorer countries of the European periphery latecomers to the Age of Mass Migration? We test the diffusion hypothesis, which argues that mass emigration was delayed by an initial lack of well developed migration networks, and that the geographic expansion of these networks in a process of spatial diffusion was the main factor that eventually unleashed mass emigration. We propose a model of migration within a spatial network to formalize this hypothesis and to derive its testable predictions. Focusing on post-unification Italy, we construct a comprehensive commune- and district-level panel of emigration data over four decades, and use it to show that the testable predictions of the diffusion hypothesis are validated by the data. Crucially, we show that Italian mass migration to North America began in a few separate epicenters from which it expanded over time in an orderly pattern of spatial expansion, and that the epidemiological characteristics of this expansion match those underlying our model. 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.