

The geography of secularization and reproductive behaviour. Continuity and change in a Catholic setting (North-Eastern Italy, 1946-2008)

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Abstract:

Past studies suggest the existence of an association between secularization and reproductive behaviours in different stages of the demographic transition. The aim of this paper is to test whether there is an association between the geography of secularization and the geography of reproductive behaviours since the first half of the 20th century in one of the areas in Europe where the influence of Catholicism has been most pervasive: the North-Eastern Italian regions of Trentino-Alto-Adige, Veneto and Friuli-Venezia-Giulia. This paper employs a spatial econometric approach using data from 1,200 municipalities. As dependent variables, we use municipal-level estimates of fertility in the 1950s and 1970s, birth postponement in 1980s, marital dissolution in 1990s and non-marital fertility in 2000s, aimed at capturing fertility levels during the final phase of the First Demographic Transition (FDT), and changes in reproductive and marital behaviour in the initial phases of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT). As indicators of secularization, we use the proportion of votes for parties other than the Christian Democratic Party (DC) in 1946, the proportion of votes in favour of the divorce law in the referendum of 1974, and the proportion of votes other than DC in 1992. Preliminary results from Spatial Lag and Spatial Durbin models show that 1) “new” reproductive behaviours are more likely to be found in municipalities characterized by high secularization; 2) spatial autocorrelation is positive for reproductive behaviours (i.e. neighbouring areas show similar reproductive behaviours) and negative for secularization (i.e. neighbouring areas show different levels of secularization, with high-secularized province-capital cities surrounded by low-secularized municipalities); 3) some areas remain persistently reluctant to secularization.

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