

Project: Assessing geographical mobility between marginal and central areas in Italy through secondary data analysis

1. Background and rationale

Although classical research on social stratification has extensively considered the geographical dimensions of social inequalities (Sorokin 1927; Blau & Duncan 1967), a surprisingly much lower number of studies have focused on how spatial arrangements affect the intergenerational reproduction of social inequalities in the last decades. This has occurred despite most developed societies are experiencing growing territorial disparities, related to the geographically uneven effects of globalization and technological innovations, as well as to the upgrading of the occupational structures of the most developed areas (Oesch 2013). These structural changes are at the basis of new and unexplored sources of geographical inequality, which cannot be entirely captured by the classic rural-urban cleavage and that require new tools of investigation.

By shedding new light on the complex associations between spatial arrangements and social inequalities in Italy – a context characterized by remarkable geographical disparities – the present project proposes to study geographical inequalities along a continuum between ‘central’ and ‘marginal’ areas. Central areas are those areas that attract highly qualified human capital (Moretti 2004), offer better job opportunities and life chances (Fielding 1992), and ease the so-called inclusive institutions, which encourage participation in economic activities that make the best use of individual talents and skills (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012). Marginal areas are instead characterized by a massive depopulation, fewer economic and life opportunities, and by a reduction in the available social services, which inevitably reverberates in new forms of social inequalities. The disparities between central and marginal areas have become one of the most urgent research topics among economists (Moretti 2012; Chetty et al. 2014), and many countries have adopted place-based policies to reduce geographical disparity, among which Italy with the *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne* (Barca et al. 2014, SNAI). Despite this growing attention to geographical inequalities, sociologists interested in social inequality and demographers have had a marginal role in this debate (Lobao et al. 2004) and many issues related to the uneven geographical distribution of social inequalities and life opportunities are yet to be analysed. Research on social inequality also neglected another aspect related to geographical inequalities, i.e., the geographical mobility (Wimmer & Schiller 2003), which is a far-reaching social phenomenon (King & Skeldon 2010) with crucial effects on individual’s life chances and outcomes (Panichella 2014).

Also the Italian stratification research has only marginally considered the social consequences of geographical disparities, despite Italy has a relatively high level of social inequality (Cobalti & Schizzerotto, 1993; Pisati & Schizzerotto 2004; Bernardi & Ballarino 2016) and is historically characterized by remarkable socio-economic geographical heterogeneities. More specifically, while the cleavage between North and South (the *questione meridionale*) as well as the specificities of the Third Italy (Bagnasco 1977) have been at the core of academic and public discussion (Trigilia 1992; Felice 2014; Avola 2017), there is little research on the social consequences of the differentiation among marginal and central areas *within* these geographical cleavages. The same applies to internal geographical mobility: this issue also has been primarily studied along the North-South cleavage (see Panichella 2014 for a review), whereas the social consequences of other internal movements have been little analysed.

Recently, also the Italian literature has started to be interested in other forms of territorial inequality, and an important public and scientific debate has arisen around the issue of marginal areas. Nevertheless, this new research stream has analysed only some specific social and economic phenomena – such as, for instance, economic resilience (Faggian et al. 2018) and the nested markets of marginal areas (Osti & Carrosio 2020) – and their implication for the intergenerational reproduction of social inequalities has been so far overlooked. In addition, since there is a lack of detailed information allowing to study the geographical dimension of social inequality (Panichella 2014), most empirical studies focused on specific geographical areas, making it difficult to generalize the findings nationwide. Thus, a more systematic picture of the geographical dimensions of social inequalities and life chances in Italy is still needed.

2. Aim of the project and specific objectives

The present project is part of a larger research area called GESI (*Geography and Social Inequality in Italy*), the first systematic research investigating how the geographical area of origin influences different aspects of individual life courses and reverberates on social inequalities in life outcomes in Italy. GESI considers the multidimensional and cumulative nature of social stratification by focusing on different aspects of individuals’

life chances – i.e., occupational opportunities, social mobility pathways, and geographical mobility – and by paying special attention to the geographical cleavage between central and marginal areas.

Within GESI, the present project constitutes a Work Package (WP3) dealing with a specific aspect of individuals' life chances – that is, internal geographical mobility – and is articulated in three tasks.

Task 3.1 The first task (T3.1) studies the individual characteristics favouring different types of internal geographical mobility (Impicciatore & Panichella 2019), as well as the changes of internal migration over time/cohorts. T3.1 considers different types of internal migrants: student movers, economic movers, and family-related movers, as well as temporal movers – i.e., those who returned to their place of origin (also after retirement) – and those who experienced multiple episodes of migration (also over long distances). T3.1 also focuses on the stayers (non-movers), comparing 'reluctant', i.e., those who did not migrate because of valuable amenities in marginal areas (lower cost of housing, proximity with family support, etc.), and 'committed' stayers, i.e., those who were not able to implement a migration strategy (Stockdale 2002).

Task 3.2 The second task (T3.2) investigates the association between geographical mobility, occupational outcomes, and social mobility pathways. Three groups are compared: those who moved from marginal to central areas (*different types of movers*, see above); those who remained in marginal areas (*stayers of marginal areas*); and those who come from central areas (*stayers of central areas*). The comparison between these groups – which can be barely applied to international migration – allows us not only to identify the penalising factors of the internal movers compared to the stayers of central areas, but also to evaluate whether the choice of moving has been 'advantageous' compared to the decision to stay in the place of origin (Panichella 2018).

Task 3.3 The third task (T3.3) considers whether the effects of internal mobility interact with the social background of origin, asking if its impact is stronger for individuals with lower origins (*compensation effect*, Bernardi 2014) or for those with higher origins (*boosting effect*, Di Prete & Eirich 2006). If the former effect prevails, then the question becomes whether the impact of geographical mobility is strong enough to alter the individual's position in the social hierarchy defined by circumstances of birth.

3. Methodology and expected results

Starting from the analysis of secondary data, the project will analyse the individual characteristics of movers and non-movers according to the type of experienced mobility (student-, temporary-, return mobility) and the reason for migration (economic vs. affective reasons), based on the interplay between the place of origin and destination, and their characteristics of centrality/marginality. To achieve these goals, advanced statistical methods will be applied to suitable population data, including cutting-edge methods for minimizing problems that typically inhibit the identification of causal links – i.e., selection and endogeneity. Data sources include (but are not limited to) Istat's Italian Labour Force Survey and Istat's Multipurpose Survey on Households: Families, Social Subjects and Life Cycle. The present project does not aim to map marginal areas in Italy. Rather, it exploits the detailed territorial information/classification(s) made available by the SNAI program (see SNAI open data) to study the impact of being raised in different geographical areas with an uneven distribution of services, resources, and opportunities on life chances in key societal domains. If necessary, this definition will be integrated by the project with other geographical indicators (altimetry, municipality size, etc.), which are also used in a diachronic perspective.

Expected results of the project include: the identification of the individual characteristics favouring different types of internal geographical mobility; the identification of possible penalising factors for internal movers compared to stayers in central areas; the evaluation of whether the choice of moving is in fact 'advantageous' for movers, compared to the decision to stay in the place of origin; hypothesis verification on the existence of compensation/boosting effects linked to internal mobility depending on the individual's position in the social hierarchy defined by circumstances of birth.

4. Job description

The successful candidates will join the GESI project and participate fully in the research life of the research team and engage in advanced independent research within the remit of the project. More specifically, the appointed researchers will carry out the following research activities:

- Contribute actively to the research of the GESI project;
- Produce a systematic literature review on the specified research area;
- Prepare and manage data sources for the project;
- Prepare no. 3 scientific articles to be (i) discussed and presented during both scheduled GESI meetings and scientific events involving external experts, and (ii) submitted to international peer-reviewed and high-impact journals for publication.

- Represent the research group at internal and external meetings/seminars and present papers at conferences and public meetings;
- Participate in the research activities of the GESI project and the Department of Statistical Sciences;
- Undertake appropriate organisational duties within the group when required such as organising research meetings, workshops, seminars, and conference sessions.

5. References

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