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Poverty and Regional Policy

An empirical puzzle: Falling migration and
growing unemployment differentials among
Italian regions

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Abstract

We investigate the causes behind the low and falling mobility levels in (Southern) Italy. We argue that a combination of demographic factors, high mobility costs and inefficiencies in the job matching process may account for the fall in interregional migration. © Elsevier Science B.V.

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1. Introduction

Historically, European populations have always been highly mobile. In the nineteenth century, Europeans flocked to the Americas and to Australia seeking to escape from deprivation and persecutions at home. Intra-European migrations were also substantial (Hatton and Williamson, 1993). The pattern continued after World

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War II. Between 1955 and 1970, more than 10 million Europeans migrated abroad in search of better working and living conditions. Internal migrations also soared, particularly from the backward regions of Italy and Spain. In the last two decades, however, the picture has radically changed. It is indeed an accepted fact that European mobility, both among and within countries, has declined markedly and compares unfavourably with mobility in other industrial countries. Low mobility is a cause of concern for European policy-makers to the extent that it may aggravate the labour market impact of regional shocks, particularly when the completion of monetary union will preclude the possibility of relying on exchange rate adjustments.

Typically, the low level of mobility in Europe is attributed to cultural and linguistic factors. Compared to the US, for instance, it is often argued that Europe is a much less homogeneous and cohesive area, making it more costly both in economic and psychological terms for migrants to move. This line of reasoning is not entirely convincing, for at least two reasons. First, cultural and linguistic factors should have been at work even during the fifties and the sixties and cannot account therefore for the fall in international migrations. Second, cultural and linguistic factors cannot explain why *internal* migrations are also very low.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the causes behind the low and falling mobility levels in Italy. We focus in particular on one empirical puzzle, namely the fact that falling internal migrations in Italy, as well as in other European countries, have been accompanied by growing differentials in regional unemployment levels.

2. The empirical puzzle

The evidence on the decline of internal and international labour mobility in Europe is virtually undisputed (see Faini (1996) for a recent survey). The fall in internal migrations is particularly puzzling for those countries, such as Italy, which have seen a substantial increase in regional disparities. In Fig. 1 we report the evolution of both internal migration and interregional unemployment differentials in Italy. We see that migrations between Northern and Southern Italy have fallen steadily despite the substantial increase in the unemployment differential between the two regions. We briefly review some plausible explanations of these surprising trends.

First, migration may have declined simply because regional wages have progressively converged. We find this explanation not entirely compelling. Nominal wage equalization in Italy was largely achieved at the end of the sixties following a union agreement to abolish regional wage differentials. It would require implausible long lags and rising interregional differences in the cost-of-living indices to explain the uninterrupted decline in migration which has lasted until the end of the eighties. Even more importantly, if wages are corrected by the

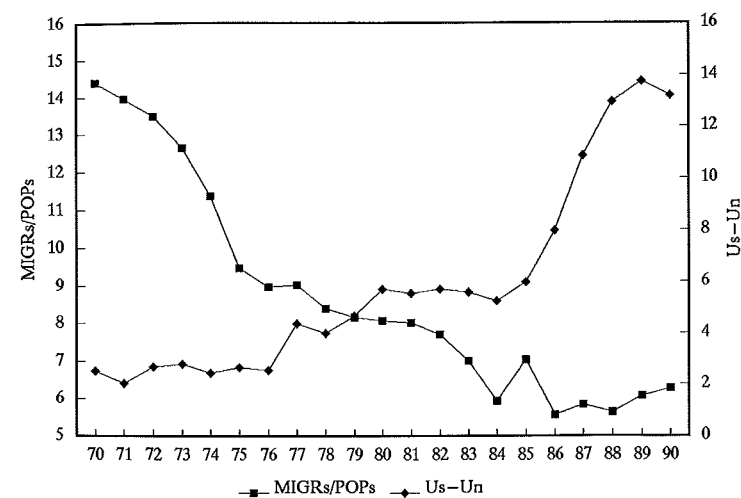


Fig. 1. Migration and unemployment.

probability of finding a job, it is much less clear that regional wage convergence has been achieved. We conclude that (expected) income considerations cannot account for the fall in interregional migrations.

Second, family and government support could explain the decline in the propensity to migrate. The argument, put forward by Attanasio and Padoa-Schioppa (1991), runs as follows. Higher disposable income means that it has become easier for Southern Italian households to finance protracted period of unemployment of some of their members. Elder people in particular are less willing to move because of their short time horizon and do not need to do so because of government support through early retirement practices and other social security benefits. Similarly, young cohorts are in no need to migrate because they can rely on family support. As a result, few people migrate. According to this view, cutting government transfers in the South should boost interregional mobility. The argument is in principle convincing, but not free from ambiguities. For instance, higher household income may make it easier to finance the costs of migration. The evidence we report below lends support to this alternative interpretation.

Another potential culprit for the low mobility in Italy is housing. Rent controls and punitive taxation on housing transactions combine to stifle both the rental and sales markets. The costs of housing transactions and the difficulties of finding a rented accommodation are likely to play a prominent role in discouraging interregional mobility.

Demographic factors represent a further candidate to explain the fall in mobility levels. According to this view, the ageing of the population should be associated with a decline in the propensity to migrate given that mobility is typically higher

among young cohorts. Yet, there is little evidence that at least in Southern Italy the weight of young cohorts has declined significantly. However, changing demographic attitudes may also affect mobility. For instance, rising women labour force participation makes it more difficult for the household to move.

Finally, low mobility may be attributed to widespread inefficiencies in the job matching process among different regions. Gil and Jimeno (1993) for instance argue that if the probability of being hired in a given region is substantially higher for somebody residing in that region than for the residents of other regions, migrations should precede employment. If, however, mobility costs are sufficiently high, then we could fall in a low migration equilibrium. We shall see that our empirical results lend some support to this approach.

Overall, the discussion so far indicates that a combination of demographic factors, high mobility costs and inefficiencies in the job matching process may in principle account for the fall in mobility levels in (Southern) Italy. These factors must be sufficiently strong to offset the influence of rising unemployment differentials. In the next section, we take a closer look at the empirical evidence.

3. Some econometric evidence

Short of data on actual mobility, we rely on the subjective attitudes toward mobility. Our main data source is the quarterly Labour Force Survey. Respondents to the Labour Force Survey are asked whether they would be willing to take a job (a) only in their own town, (b) in a neighbouring town, (c) anywhere. Of course, actual behaviour may not correspond to declared attitudes. However, subjective attitudes may cast some light on the mobility issue, as shown for instance by Hughes and McCormick (1985) for Great Britain and by Ahn et al. (1995) for Spain.

The distribution of responses is presented in Table 1. We find that almost 40% of unemployed are willing to take a job only in their own town. As expected, the willingness to move is higher among Southerners, males and more educated people. For instance, 31% of unemployed males in the South with a basic education are willing to go anywhere against 16% in the North. Interestingly enough, Mezzogiorno residents are on average less willing to take a job in a neighbouring city.

Admittedly, the data in Table 1 are not always fully informative. A negative attitude toward mobility may for instance simply reflect the family position of respondents: unemployed spouses are typically less ready to commute on a daily basis because of their child-caring obligations. They are, in Mincer's terminology, 'tied movers'. Faini et al. (1996) show that spouses are 'ceteris paribus' less mobile, thereby lending support to the notion that rising labour force participation of women may have affected mobility. In this paper, we focus exclusively on unemployed son/daughters. In principle, this group should include highly mobile

Table 1
Mobility attitudes

	All unemployed			
	Males		Females	
	North	South	North	South
(a) Basic education				
Own town	39.8	32.9	53.6	61.0
Nearby town	44.2	36.1	41.0	28.5
Anywhere	16.0	31.0	5.4	10.5
Total	100	100	100	100
(b) High school				
Own town	27.7	23.8	36.3	44.8
Nearby town	46.5	33.5	52.0	31.1
Anywhere	25.8	42.7	11.7	24.1
Total	100	100	100	100
(c) University				
Own town	20.7	26.9	27.9	31.8
Nearby town	27.6	30.8	44.3	38.6
Anywhere	51.7	42.3	27.8	29.4
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: ISTAT.

people both because of their age and because of their more limited family ties. Yet, their overall mobility is quite limited. For instance, only 23.6% of those with a basic education are willing to take a job anywhere. Focussing on this group should cast some light on the pattern of mobility attitudes.

We rely on a multinomial logit specification with three possible alternatives. We have also estimated an ordered logit specification (available on request), where mobility choices are ordinaly ranked. We distinguish three kinds of regressors, depending on whether they are meant to control for (a) individual, (b) family, or (c) environmental factors. In the first group, we include age, education and sex of the respondent. In the second group, we include a variable that measures the percentage of household members that are either employed or receive a State pension. We seek to capture in this way the impact of both household support and government transfers. Especially in the South, (disability) pensions have typically been used by past governments as a discretionary income subsidy (Attanasio and Padoa-Schioppa, 1991). If household income is used to finance protracted unemployment at home, thereby discouraging migration, the attitude toward migration should be negatively affected by the percentage of household members that is either employed or entitled to a pension. As an alternative measure of the household conditions, we rely on a dummy variable that takes a value of one if the household head is employed and zero otherwise. We would have liked to introduce

Table 2
Econometric determinants of mobility attitudes (multinomial logit)

	Mobility choice					
	Relative effects			Total effect		
	Own vs. nearby town	Anywhere vs. nearby town	Own town vs. anywhere	Own town	Nearby town	Anywhere
Female	+ *	– *	+ *	+	?	–
University	– *	+ *	– *	–	?	+
Diploma	–	+ *	– *	–	?	+
Age	– **)	+ *	– *	–	?	+
(Age) ²	+ *	– *	+ *	+	?	–
Family's employment rate	– *	+	– *	–	?	+
Regional unemployment	+ *	+ *	– *	?	–	+

* Statistically significant at a 5% confidence level.

** Statistically significant at a 10% confidence level.

among the regressors actual household income, but unfortunately we have no information on this variable. Finally, environmental factors are introduced in the equation through a set of regional dummies. The estimated regional effects are then regressed on regional unemployment to assess the effect of regional joblessness on mobility attitudes. Estimation results are presented in Table 2.¹ Individual characteristics have the expected impact on mobility. Males and more educated individuals are more likely to be willing to take a job anywhere compared to the alternative choice of moving to a neighbouring town (column 2) or staying at home (column 3). Similarly, males and more educated people, if faced with the choice between taking a job only in their own town or accepting one in a neighbouring area, are more likely to prefer the latter (column 1). Age has a positive impact on the attitude towards mobility, although this effect declines with age itself. The effect of family conditions is worth noticing. Our results indicate

¹ The first two columns report the estimation results of the multinomial logit model with choice (b) ('nearby town') taken as the reference choice. Column 3 takes choice (c) ('anywhere') as the base choice. The last three columns report the impact of a given characteristic on the probability that a certain alternative is preferred. As is well-known, with more than two alternatives the interpretation of the coefficients is sometimes difficult. For instance, from column 1 [2] we see that having a university degree means that the odds of preferring choice (a) [choice (c)] to choice (b) is lower [higher]. From column 3 we see that the same characteristic implies a lower relative probability of preferring choice (a) with respect to choice (c). We can then conclude that university graduates are more (less) willing to take a job anywhere (only in their own town). Whether university graduates are more likely to prefer choice (b) (taking a job in a neighbouring city) is instead ambiguous.

that a higher percentage of employed (or retired) members in the household is associated with more rather than less mobility. This seems to contradict the view that family and government support has been used to finance unemployment and avoid migration. Simple cross-tabulations (not reported here) confirm this finding. Using the household head employment dummy variable or the household unemployment rate leads to qualitatively identical results.

We can now turn to the second stage regression, where we regress the (estimated) regional fixed effects on regional unemployment. We find that the level of regional joblessness has a positive effect on the propensity to take a job anywhere, but a negative impact on the willingness to accept a job in a neighbouring city. This is a noteworthy result. In the regional literature, it has been typically very hard to identify a correctly signed impact of regional unemployment on migration (Pissarides and Wadsworth, 1989; Hughes and McCormick, 1994; Antolin and Bover, 1995). In the Italian case, we face no such difficulty provided that we do not try to rank the various mobility choices.² Our results indicate that, at least for Italy, the impact of regional unemployment on mobility is highly non-linear, to the extent that it fosters – as theory would suggest – long-distance mobility but discourages short-haul migration.³ The fact that high regional unemployment is associated with a lower propensity to move over short distances should be interpreted as showing that regional unemployment is highly correlated across space.

To sum up, our results so far do not lend much support to the notion that unemployed youth in the South do not migrate because they can rely on family support. On the opposite, we find that higher household income (imperfectly proxied by the family's employment rate) is associated with greater mobility. Presumably, poorer families are unable to finance migration costs that can be sometimes quite substantial, especially for housing purposes.

We must still assess the impact of presumed inefficiencies in the interregional job-matching process. The Labour Force Survey provides valuable information on job-search strategies of unemployed individuals. Casavola and Sestito (1993) have shown that, compared to other countries, Italy's unemployed tend to rely to a disproportionate extent on family's and friends networks in their job-searching activities. Unfortunately, we cannot rely directly on these data in our regressions for obvious endogeneity and identification problems. Nonetheless, in Table 3, we

² The results in Table 2 rely on a multinomial logit model, where we assume no ranking among the three alternative choices in terms of mobility attitudes. Estimating an ordered logit specification where the three alternatives are ranked ordinally in terms of mobility levels (with a preference for choice 3 [1] indicating a most [least] favourable attitude toward mobility), the results are basically unchanged except for the fact that we do not find a significant effect of regional unemployment on mobility attitudes.

³ A similar result is found in Hughes and McCormick (1985) analysis of migrations to a new region conditional on movements to a new residence.

Table 3
Mobility attitudes and job-search (first-time job-seekers)^a

Mobility attitudes	Job search	
	Family and friends	Other channels
Southern Italy:		
Own town only	42.19	37.18
Everywhere	16.41	20.22

^a Percentage of those willing to move to the stated location.

Source: Own elaborations on the 1995 Labour Force Survey.

report some useful evidence. A simple cross-tabulation between mobility attitudes and job-search strategies show that Mezzogiorno unemployed that rely relatively more on family's and friends networks for the purpose of finding a job are also those who are less willing to migrate particularly to far-away destinations. These results must be interpreted with some caution, but they seem to indicate that low mobility levels are associated with primitive job-searching strategies. If vacancies information in other regions were more easily provided, many unemployed would not need to rely on local networks and would be perhaps more willing to migrate to other regions. This result also shows that family support may come in terms of assistance in the job-searching process rather than – as argued earlier – by financing protracted spells of unemployment at home.

4. Conclusions

Overall, our results indicate that the pattern of low mobility in Italy's youth must be attributed to a combination of inefficiencies in the interregional job-matching process and high mobility costs. The policy implications are worth stressing. Public sector agencies in Italy still hold a legal monopoly on job placement activities. These agencies have so far behaved as blatantly inefficient monopolies. They provide no training and no information on job vacancies in other provinces, not to say regions. Their legal monopoly should be abolished so as to allow private sector agencies to provide more adequate information on vacancies and limit thereby the excessive reliance by unemployed on local networks in their job searching activities.

High mobility costs also appear to deter mobility, as witnessed by the fact that households with an unemployed head or with a small income-generating capability show a more limited willingness to move. Punitive housing taxation and widespread rent controls have surely played a substantial role in increasing the costs of geographical mobility. Policy intervention in this area seems imperative.

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