

Political Fragmentation, Forced Mobility, and Knowledge Accumulation in Europe before 1800

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Abstract

We study a mechanism linking political fragmentation to knowledge accumulation in Europe before 1800. Europe's fragmented political landscape was characterized by frequent local disruptions, including plague outbreaks, nearby battles, and ruler changes, which forced scholars to relocate across cities and universities. Using data on 70,000 scholars, we exploit these shocks as instruments for mobility and find that forced relocation increased lifetime productivity by about 33 percent. We embed the micro estimates in a quantitative model with inter-generational learning externalities to assess aggregate effects. Counterfactual simulations imply that, without shock-induced mobility, Europe's knowledge growth would have been substantially slower, delaying the historical takeoff by centuries.