

Marriage and Fertility in the Italian Alps: The Impact of a Regime Change, 1790-1820

Marco Casari ^{*†}

Maurizio Lisciandra [‡]

Claudio Tagliapietra ^{*}

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Abstract

Between the 13th and 19th centuries, hundreds of self-regulating communities in the Bishopric of Trento in the Alps regulated the access to common-property resources (CPRs) through formal Charters. Some communities restricted CPRs access only to community insiders through patrilineal inheritance regulations, while others left inheritance regulations under a more egalitarian customary law. At the turn of the 19th century, consecutive changes of regime abolished the previous inheritance institutions and imposed a centralized egalitarian inheritance system to all communities. Using this natural experiment and a novel dataset of registers from 52 parishes, we investigate theoretically and empirically the effects of the inheritance regime change. The transition reduced local endogamy and consanguinity, and increased birth rates. The institutional change also brought a convergence across community groups that previously adopted different institutional arrangements. More in general, this historical case exemplifies how exogenous changes of inheritance laws may have severe impacts on the sociobiology of traditional small-scale societies of the present-day developing world.

Keywords: Endogamy, Inheritance, Commons, Napoleon, Parish registers.

JEL Classification: D23, K11, L14, N53, P48.

^{**} Department of Economics, University of Bologna Italy.

[†] Corresponding Author: marco.casari@unibo.it

[‡] Department of Economics, University of Messina, Italy.