

CHILD MARRIAGE GEOGRAPHIC DIMENSION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

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Abstract. Despite the extensive literature on family structures and marriage patterns developed more or less uniformly in Europe, the presence of child marriage in Italy (and Europe) has not been analyzed from a demographic and historical perspective. Employing census data available for the Kingdom of Italy, this article tried to offer a spatial overview of child marriage diffusion in the second half of the nineteenth century. Despite the phenomenon was marginal, it was present in many Southern regions, especially in Sicily. However, the second and third Censuses show a drastic reduction in this marriage practice everywhere.

1. Introduction

The celebration of marriages involving minors in more or less ancient times is certainly not a breakthrough. Normally, in historical demographic literature, child brides are framed within the discourse on marriage patterns, fertility, and age at marriage, which are in turn related to family composition and its determinants. Suffice it to mention the works by Hajnal dedicated to age at marriage and celibacy (1953), and to the identification of the famous 'European Marriage Pattern' (1965). According to the first theorizing, in the territories west of an imaginary line drawn from Trieste to Petersburg, both women and men used to get married at a late age and establish a new residence while a significant proportion of the population used to not get married. The work fuelled a decades-long debate and has ensued over the years. Laslett in 1977 focused on the Western family composition and its characteristics. Many scholars have been concerned to point out the inadequacy of these models in describing marriage behaviours, especially in southern Europe. If Rowland (1988) advanced the hypothesis of a regional rather than chronological development of marriage patterns with particular reference to the Iberic Peninsula, other Italian authors tried to investigate how well Hajnal and Laslett's theories on age at marriage, celibacy, and family structures could adhere to the Italian case. Barbagli (1984) in his synthesis of the Italian modern family clearly showed the variety of structures and marriage customs among the different regions. Rettaroli (1990), using Hajnal's methods, estimated the age at marriage in Italy during the nineteenth century discovering significative differences among and within macro

areas (Centre-North and South) and also finding divergence from Hajnal and Laslett's family structures ideas. A few years later, Cocchi et al. (1996) focusing on the same period, underlined two aspects already touched on by Rettaroli and other scholars (Delille, 1977; Delille, 1985; Livi-Bacci, 1977), the role of agricultural production system (sharecropping, latifundia) and the hereditary system in influencing matrimonial choices identifying the root cause of the environmental characteristics of the area. At the same time, there have been those who have raised doubts about the rigidity of the correlation between age at marriage and neolocal or patrilocal residence. In this perspective, a neolocal residence is not necessarily associated with a high age at marriage and vice versa a patrilocal residence with earlier marriage, as shown by the example of some areas in southern Europe where a neo-local residence pattern prevails, but the age at marriage is lower (Benigno, 1989; Viazzo and Albera, 1990). In other words, age at marriage, in particular female age at marriage, represents a crucial point for research on the history of the family and at the same time the variable hardest to explain (Hajnal, 1965).

A recent paper analyzed the wedding dynamics, including the presence of young brides, in a small village belonging to the Agrigento province, Montallegro (Freni, 2023). Notwithstanding, what is probably missing is a broader historical and demographic work putting the topic at the core. This lack can be attributed to the scarcity of detailed information or simply to a lack of sensitivity towards the issue, which has been re-emerging as an imported phenomenon in Italy and other Western countries only in recent decades.

After a short description of the historical and economic picture of Italy in the nineteenth century, and the illustration of data employed, the paper intends to investigate the geographical dimension and the evolution of the phenomenon in the second half of the nineteenth century through a spatial perspective.

2. Italian socio-economic context in the nineteenth century

After the Napoleonic experience and the footprints left at the structural and institutional level, previous States were restored in Italy. All shared a low political relevance and dependency on foreign powers (Barbagallo, 2013). In March 1861 the *Mille* led by Garibaldi succeeded in the fateful feat of reunifying almost all of the Italian peninsula. However, the regions of Veneto and Friuli joined Italy only later, in 1866, while Rome including most parts of Lazio, was conquered in 1870 (Trentino Alto-Adige and Trieste only after the First World War). The new State resulted from a varied composition of elements and expressions of the different pre-union realities. The small Savoy Kingdom promoter of the unification process after the uprisings of 1848 became a constitutional monarchy and undertook an initial program of liberal

reforms. A modest spirit of reform was present in Lombardo-Veneto and Granducato of Tuscany. While the same process of renewal did not occur in the Kingdom of the two Sicilies (Meriggi, 2002). The situation in the Church-State was not so different except for new infrastructure and drainage. The different foresight of the rulers was reflected in the different impetus given to the development of communication routes, and the financial sector both necessary for the entrepreneurial activity of the bourgeois, class almost absent in the southern Kingdom. All in all, Italy was a relatively poor country if compared with the other European states, although the number of people in extreme poverty was higher in the south where even inequalities and illiteracy rates were more significant (Felice, 2013). Nevertheless, if at the end of the 1800s, the northern regions started a first timid process of industrialization, the South was still far from it. At the same time, central Italy was closer to the North than to the South. Economic differences were compounded by cultural and anthropological differences made up of mentalities, customs, and beliefs reflected in social structures, family composition, and even marriage practices still reflections of the pre-unitarian marriage regulations. In fact, the restored states reintroduced their civil codes partly influenced by the recent French experience (Sciarra, 2016) and all providing for uneven minimum requirements for validly contracting marriage. The Savoy Kingdom and the Estensi States (Modena, Reggio-Emilia, and Massa-Carrara) did not establish a minimum age to contract marriage, however, even after having reached the majority at the age of 21 for both sexes, parental consent was necessary (artt. 106, 109, 110 Codice Civile Regno di Sardegna, artt. 79-80 Codice Civile Stati Estensi). In the *Gran Ducato* of Parma, Piacenza, and Guastalla, the minimum legal age to get married was 15 for girls and 18 for boys while parental approval was necessary for both until the age of 24 (art. 35 *Codice Civile* di Parma, Piacenza e Guastalla). The State of the Church (Roma with Lazio, Marche, Umbria) and its *legazioni* (Ferrara, Bologna, Ravenna, and Forlì) did not allow marriage before puberty (no specification of age) and stressed the necessity of true consent of the spouses. The situation was different in the South. The Neapolitan Code of 1819 allows to contract valid marriage to all girls of at least 12 and boys of 14 years old (art.152 *Codice per lo Regno delle due Sicilie*), true consent between spouses and parental approval was demanded until respectively 21 and 25 (art. 167). In the former Habsburg territories, marriage was absolutely denied for impuberants (both girls and boys under 14, art. 14 *Codice civile Generale Asburgico*). The Habsburg Civil Code differs from the others in its greater insistence on the need for true consent to contract marriage and severe penalties for those who perform marriages in the absence of proven requirements (art. 78 *Codice Civile Asburgico*).

These differences in marriage regulation were reflected in the minimum age of girls already married recorded in the first Italian General Population Census: a

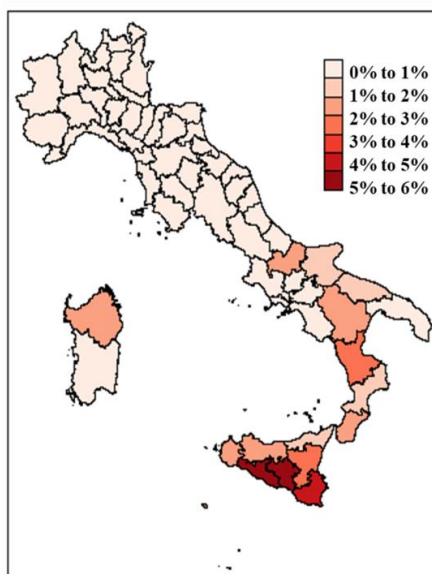
unique case of a girl of only 10 years in the province of Cosenza, and several of 11 in other southern regions, while 15 in most parts of central and northern Italy.

3. Census Data and Child Marriage

Following the example of other scholars who have investigated age at marriages and family structure in nineteenth-century Italy (Rettaroli 1990; Cocchi et.al 1996), the sources here employed are the first three Italian censuses conducted in 1861, 1871, and 1881 by the new Italian Kingdom. The 1861 Census was the first attempt of the new Italian State to have knowledge of the country and its inhabitants. As might be expected, methods of data collection and information content evolve over time, adapting to the needs and the means of the moment (Mastroluca and Verrascina, 2010). These aspects are perfectly visible when observing the different organization content from the first to the third one and affect the marital status of the population too. In fact, the first census gathers the population by age, sex, marital status, and reading and writing capability at the provincial level and within the province distinguishes between towns with more and less than 6000 inhabitants. The second one offers this classification for the entire province and for its provincial capital. Only the third one would allow a more detailed analysis providing the same information at the provincial and district level. Nevertheless, at the time of the third census (1881), the number of young married girls was so low as to leave little room for further investigation. Consequently, in order to make the three Censuses comparable among them, the present study employs the province as a statistical unit of analysis. Before going into the core of the analysis, some little premises are needed. Firstly, even though child marriage can affect both girls and boys, the formers are more likely to be involved, for this reason, the focus here is mainly on the number of child brides and child widows as a sort of indicator to measure the child marriage dimension among the Italian provinces. Secondly, here the definition of child brides includes all girls until the age of 15 already married or widows at the time of the Census. It is necessary to spend some words to explain why the threshold of 15 has been chosen. The question is not easy to address since in the past there was a different conception of childhood and adolescence. For this reason, to find a criterion as objective as possible, the present work refers to the minimum legal age to contract marriage established by law and since in pre-unitarian Italy, as shown before, there was not a unique 'answer' everywhere, the landmark here adopted is the new Civil Code Pisanelli introduced by the Italian Kingdom in 1866, which required a minimum age of 15 for girls and 18 for boys (art. 55). At first glance, it would appear more logical to establish the threshold at 14, rather than 15. However, an aspect to keep in mind is that the census does not offer information about the age

of marriages of Italian inhabitants, they just take a picture of the marital status, this means that a maiden of 15 may have been married most likely before the age of 15, at least when she was 14. To have a visual idea of how this marriage practice was widespread in the Italian territories, we can start mapping the percentage of girls up to the age of 15 already married (or widows) in 1861. The numerator is the number of girls of 11 up to the age of 15 already married, while the denominator is the total amount of girls of the same age present in each Italian province ($n = 59$).

Figure 1 – Percentage of girls aged 11-15 who are already married or widows in the total population of girls aged 11 to 15 per province.



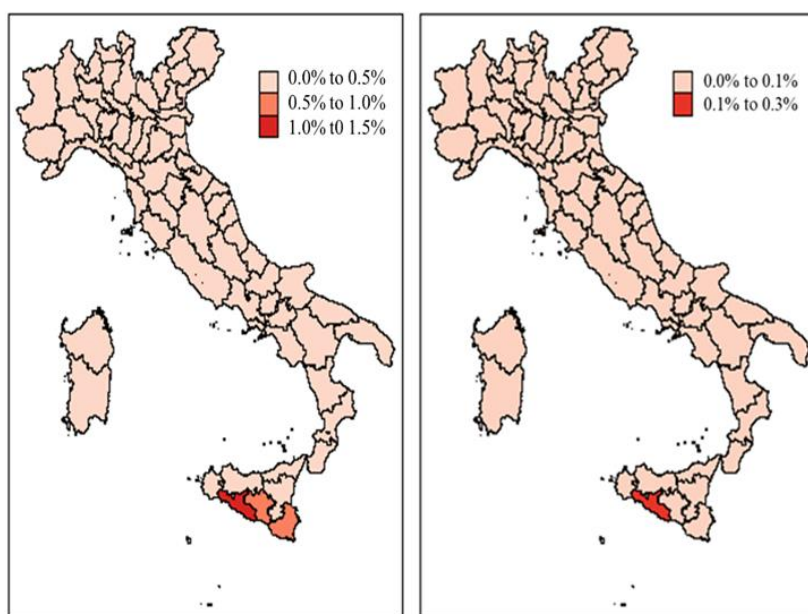
Source: 1861 Italian General Population Census.

Figure 1 shows that the rate of child brides in the total population of girls up to the age of 15 in the regions belonging to Italy in 1861 was between 0% and 6%, with prevalence in the southern regions, especially in the southern provinces of Sicily. While in the ex-Kingdom of Sardinia, the rate is between 0% and 2% (Sassari Province).

The second census realized just ten years later (1871), shows a sharp reduction of young brides/widows everywhere, including those provinces more affected according to the previous census, while in the third one, the figures appear negligible in all peninsula and islands. However, the area still interested remains southern Sicily corresponding to the provinces of Siracusa, Caltanissetta, and Agrigento. It is difficult to give a valid explanation for this consistent decrease of unions involving

very young girls in a so short time. However, it is worth remembering that the period between 1861 and the end of 1866, can be considered a sort of ‘transition’ since most of the regions were politically reunified under a unique State, but still, many aspects of civic life, including marriages, were regulated by the pre-unitarian States rules. Only in 1866, the new Civil Code Pisanelli was adopted introducing a nonreligious marriage and, among other requirements, a new minimum age to enter into marriage: 15 for girls and 18 for boys, with the need for parental consent until 21 for both (*Titolo V del Matrimonio*). It is possible to hypothesize that these aspects may have influenced marriage choices even if not everywhere in the same way. The third Census (1881) confirms the same direction providing figures even lower, proof that the phenomenon was starting significantly to decrease (at least in official documents) until almost disappeared even in southern Sicily, despite the province of Agrigento still registering the highest values.

Figures 2-3 – *Percentage of girls aged 11-15 who are already married or widows in the total population of girls aged 11 to 15 per province.*



Source: 1871 and 1881 Italian General Population Censuses.

4. Spatial Analysis of the 1861 Census

To better grasp the meaning of the phenomenon of child marriage as embedded in a specific geographical context, the analysis focuses mainly on its spatial dimension. Data here employed come from the marital status of the first Census when the phenomenon was most appreciable and takes into account all Italian female citizens from 11 up to the age of 15 considered the threshold age to define a girl as a child bride, or better, a ‘child-wife’. Spatial autocorrelation (or spatial dependency) is calculated using univariate global Moran’s index (I) (Moran, 1948; Cliff and Ord 1973). The formula currently used to obtain the Index is:

$$I = \frac{n}{W} \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^n W_{ij} Z_i Z_j}{\sum_{i=1}^n Z_i^2} \quad (1)$$

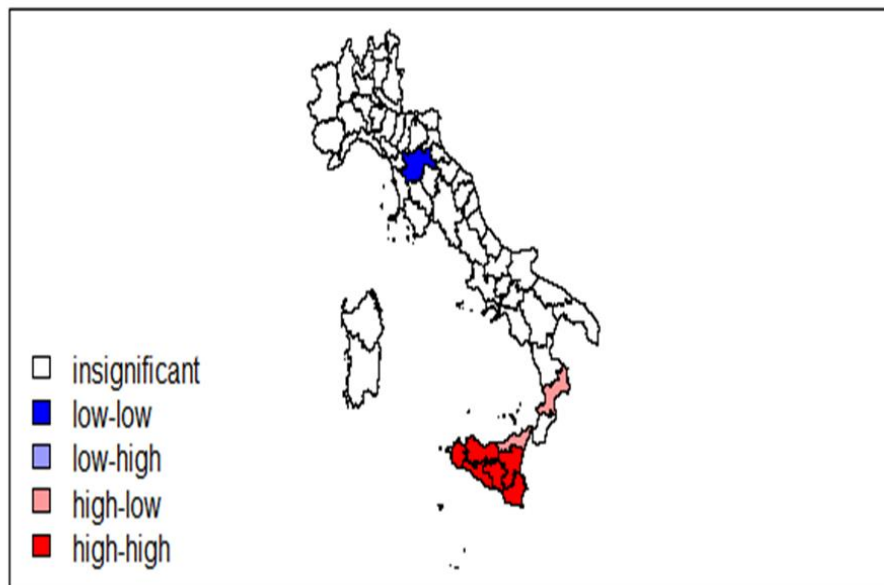
Where n is the number of observations, here ($n = 59$), W is the sum of the weights w_{ij} for all couples in the system, $Z_i = x_i - \bar{x}$ is the value of the variable at location i and the \bar{x} mean value of the variable under observation (Kalogirou, 2018). The *Moran I statistic*, whose value is between -1 and 1, in our analysis is equal to 0.68, therefore the variable observed (the percentage of brides/widows of 11-15-year-old for each province) is positively autocorrelated among the Italian provinces in 1861. The result is not surprising since normally spatial data tend to show positive spatial autocorrelation as a result of the first law of geography (Tobler 1970, ‘everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things’) However, the p -value $< 2.2e-16$ confirms the statistical significance of the model. To discover if these percentages of child-wives can be attributed to a territorial location we can resort to Local Moran’s I (Anselin, 1995). The following formula defines it:

$$I_i = \frac{(y_i - \bar{y})}{S_y^2} \sum_{j=1, j \neq i}^n (w_{ij} (y_j - \bar{y})) \quad (2)$$

where n is the number of geographical units, y_i is the value of the variable y in area i , \bar{y} is the sample average of the variable, y_j is the value of the variable y in area j and S_y^2 is the standard deviation of y , and w_{ij} is the weight corresponding to the inverse distance among the different geographic areas. First-order contiguous neighbors are defined using the queen contiguity weight matrix. It expresses the relationship between the value for one observed variable at a location k , Z_k and the mean values for another variable in the neighborhood $Z_i W_{ki} Z_i$ (3). Those areas for which the LISA (in this case the Local Moran’s I) is significant represent the local spatial clusters, or hot spots (Anselin, 1995). For the present analysis, the pseudo-significance (pseudo-

p-value) of the bivariate LISA statistic is evaluated at 1%. The LISA map identifies three types of local association: a statistically significant cluster of high values of the variable observed (High–High, in red) corresponding to all the Sicilian provinces, but Messina; a cluster of low values surrounded by low values areas (Low–Low in bright blue) identifying the province of Florence, and finally two spatial outliers, corresponding to negative values of Local Moran's, which is an area behaving considerably differently from its neighbourhood, in this case, high values surrounded by low values corresponding to the province of Catanzaro and Messina (High–Low, in pale red). The provinces in which no local association was found are white.

Figure 4 – *Child Marriage Spatial Autocorrelation Map*



Source: 1861 Italian General Population Census.

5. Discussion

As suggested in the previous sections, it is possible to infer that where the minimum legal age to contract marriage was lower, child marriage was more socially accepted and thus more widespread. However, there were some exceptions. In fact, the lowest numbers in absolute values and percentages are recorded for the Abruzzo provinces and for *Terra di Lavoro* (Caserta), both areas of the Kingdom of two

Siciles but closer to another ex-State, the State of the Church. Again, space seems to matter even more than institutional factors and the first law of geography cannot be ignored. In other words, because of spatial propinquity, these areas seem to have, at least regarding nuptiality customs, more in common with central Italy than with the provinces of Calabria or Sicilia albeit belonging to the same pre-Unitarian State. Since all of Italy was mainly Catholic, it is fair to wonder what the position of the Catholic world was regarding child marriage. The low percentage recorded in the State of the Church and in its *Legazioni* (Umbria, Pesaro-Urbino, Macerata, Ascoli-Piceno, Forlì, Ferrara, and Bologna, and after 1870, in Rome) seems to be coherent with the active role played by priests in contrasting early and forced unions (Lombardi, 2008), according to the Tridentine rules on true consent (Giraudo, 2007). Nevertheless, the introduction pages (*Considerazioni Generali*) of the first census offer a different perspective in this regard. In the overview, the author does not hesitate to comment on the presence of 11-15 and even a unique case of a ten-years-old girl already married in some provinces of the Kingdom attributing this oddity to the religious interference by the clergy who allowed what is condemned by 'hygiene and public moral'. These few lines in the introduction of an official public document are significant since they offer the perspective of the institutional powers (thus of the 'establishment') towards this issue. The comment attributes the presence of married adolescents to marriage control by religious powers and it becomes the occasion to claim a lay control over marriage following the French example. According to Giuseppe Battelli (1992), the nineteenth century represented a period of transition for the Italian clergy who decided to start a new and closer interaction with the community transforming the parish into the new active center of religious life and slowly chipping away at the centuries-old bond with the aristocratic class. Likely, this process did not happen everywhere in the same way.

The other key lecture goes back to a beaten road: the agriculture production system. Indeed, the geographical distribution of child brides seems consistent with the literature on the link between age at marriage, family structure, and type of agricultural production system (Cocchi et al. 1996, Franchetti, Sonnino 1876; Livi Bacci, 1977). According to this strand, lower age at marriage is found in areas where latifundia prevailed. The key players here are large landowners and day laborers. The latter tended to establish a new residence and marry before landowners or sharecroppers, having nothing to inherit (Barbagli 1987). Assuming a prevalence of hypergamous marriage, in which the groom is older than the bride, the younger the former the younger the latter. Actually, in the provinces of southern Sicily and Basilicata latifundia and feuds have been the rule for many decades. This result is coherent with the estimation of the (singulate) mean age at marriage in 1861 Italy offered by Rettaroli (1990) who showed that the lower male and female mean age at first marriage of unification were found in southern regions, especially Sicily and

Basilicata. Here men used to get married around 25-26 years old and women at 22, while in central and northern Italy, the averages were respectively 27-28 for men and around 24 for women.

6. Conclusion

The spatial analysis using 1861 Census data applied to investigate the presence and the dimension of child marriages in nineteenth-century Italy demonstrates that the phenomenon was spatially correlated and unevenly diffused through the country being prevalent in the southern regions, especially in Sicily, which represented a hot spot of child marriages. Moreover, it is not surprising to find the highest percentage of child wives, and thus of child marriages, where the minimum legal age to get married was lower, namely, 12 years for girls and 14 for boys (*Codice del Regno delle Due Sicilie* del 1819, Title V *Del Matrimonio*). This was the picture at the moment of Unification. However, by observing subsequent Census data (1871 and 1881 Censuses) on marital status, a drastic reduction all over the country is visible. It is hard to justify a so rapid decrease even in the areas more affected. The change of the Civil Code in 1866, which introduced a nonreligious marriage and raised the minimum age requirements with respect to some previous legislation (e.g. *Codice del Regno delle Due Sicilie*), seems to have had a role, at least in official statistics. Of course, it would be reductive to think that a Code is able to change decades, if not centuries, of marital traditions and behaviors. In addition, even within the borders of the same pre-unitarian states, (the reference is again to the Kingdom of two Sicilies) the presence of child brides and the minimum age at marriage recorded in each province varied significantly. Two other possible interpretations have been offered, the first one related to the prevalent agricultural product systems, the second one to the role of the church. To conclude, many questions are still without an answer, since even if less free than now, marriage choice was the result of many factors strictly embedded in a social, cultural, and economic context. For this reason, census aggregate data at the provincial level are not sufficient and to add new pieces to the research framework on this phenomenon individual data on marriages and spouses are needed.

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