Adapting to the Sea: The Rise of Individualism in Maritime Societies

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Cross-cultural psychologists argue that the most important dimension along which cultures differ today is the individualism-collectivism dimension. Empirical evidence furthermore show that the individualism-collectivism cleavage appear to be the single most important cultural dimension in explaining long run economic development (Gorodnichenko and Roland (2010). In this paper, I explore the historical roots of these differences. Specifically, I test the hypothesis that societies with a history of deriving a livelihood from the sea are more individualistic today. This hypothesis has been put forward by the anthropological literature since the 1960s. Using various indicators of individualism, I test the hypothesis at country level, among children of immigrants in Europe, and at the individual level. This includes country as well as subnational analysis. I find strong and robust evidence in support of the hypothesis. In order to test the historical validity of my empirical findings, I construct a measure of individualism based on children’s given name patterns in six North Atlantic countries throughout the 19th century. A regional analysis using these data confirms the existence of a link between a people’s reliance on fishing and the evolution of an individualistic culture.