

Departmental Seminar October 27, 2025

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Host : Axel Dreher

Flora, Cosmos, Salvatio: Pre-modern Academic Institutions and the Spread of Ideas

Abstract

While having good ideas is not uncommon, their spread and evolution require a community. In premodern Europe, approximately 200 universities and 150 academies of sciences employed thousands of scholars, shaping an extensive network of intellectual exchange. By reconstructing inter-personal connections through institutional affiliations, we demonstrate how the European academic landscape facilitated the diffusion of ideas and led cities to develop – examples include botanic gardens, observatories, and Protestantism. Counterfactual simulations reveal that both universities and academies played crucial roles – alongside serendipity and more traditional channels such as books – with academies being particularly effective in connecting distant parts of the network. Moreover, we show that idea diffusion through the network remains remarkably resilient, even after the removal of key regions such as England or France. In Europe, ideas gain significance being effectively channelled by powerful institutions.

Joint work with Rossana Scebbba and Chiara Zanardello