Monks, Gents and Industrialists: The Long-Run Impact of the Dissolution of the English Monasteries

Sebastian Vollmer

Abstract

In this paper we undertake an investigation of the long-run economic impact of the dissolution of the English monasteries by Henry VIII in the 1530s. This event is plausibly linked to the “rise of the gentry”, the commercialization of agriculture and political and economic change in early modern England potentially facilitating its precocious industrialization. To measure the dissolution we digitized the Valor Ecclesiasticus, the census Henry commissioned of monastic incomes in 1534 and use monastic income at the parish level from the Valor as a measure of the local impact of the dissolution. We show that parishes which the dissolution impacted more were more likely to have a textile mill in 1838, tended to have more mills and greater mill employment. We also show that they tended to have a lower proportion of their labor force in agriculture in 1831 and a higher proportion in retail trade. In addition we demonstrate that parishes where the dissolution had a greater impact had more gentry in 1700, were more likely to have land enclosed by parliament and had more innovative agriculture as measured by patents. We show these results are robust to controlling for many other potential determinants of the location and extent of industry and for a variety of strategies for accounting for unobservables. The results are consistent with Tawney’s famous thesis of the “rise of the gentry” but extend it by making the link between social change and the industrial revolution.

(joint with Leander Heldring and James A. Robinson)