The spatial distribution of Spanish transport infrastructure between 1860 and 1930

Alfonso Herranz-Loncán

Abstract  The origin of Spanish regional economic divergence can be traced back at least until the seventeenth century, although its full definition took place during industrialisation. Historians have often included uneven regional infrastructure endowments among the factors that explain divergence among Spanish regions, although no systematic analysis of the spatial distribution of Spanish infrastructure and its determinants has been carried out so far. This paper aims at filling that gap, by offering a description of the regional distribution of the main Spanish transport infrastructure between the middle of the nineteenth century and the Civil War. In addition, it estimates a panel data model to search into the main reasons that explain the differences among the Spanish regional endowments of railways and roads during that period. The outcomes of that analysis indicate that both institutional factors and the physical characteristics of each area had a strong influence on the distribution of transport infrastructure among the Spanish regions.

JEL Classification  H54 · L92 · N73 · O18

1 Introduction

The Spanish economy is nowadays characterised by huge differences in income per capita among regions. Although their origin may be traced back at least
to the second half of the seventeenth century, the modern Spanish regional economic structure was not completely defined until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the process of regional divergence and geographical concentration of income substantially accelerated. As a result of that divergence, two different areas may be distinguished in the country. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, regional indicators of income per capita, degree of industrialization or physical quality-of-life reflect a division of the country between a rich “North” (made up by most Northern and Mediterranean regions and Madrid), which has enjoyed an intense development process during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and a poor “South” (Andalusia, Extremadura, Castile-La Mancha, Murcia and the Canary Islands), which has remained relatively stagnant or has experienced a gradual economic decline in relative terms. Some regions are difficult to classify within this structure, such as the largest and most heterogeneous ones (e.g. Castile-Leon, Aragon or Andalusia), or Galicia and Asturias, which had during the second half of the nineteenth century high indices of quality of life and low levels of income per capita in relative terms. However, in spite of that complexity, the existence of a fundamental geographical dualism in the Spanish economy during the last two centuries is broadly confirmed by the available information. 

2 The Spanish regions are shown in Fig. 1, and the main regional economic variables for nineteenth and twentieth century Spain may be seen in Zapata (2001).