Economic outcomes and self-selection in the age of mass migration:
A micro approach

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In this project, we create and analyze a series of data sets that follow individuals who moved from Europe to the US during the age of mass migration in order to explore general processes of migrant selection and assimilation.

“Europe’s Tired, Poor, Huddled Masses: Self-selection and Economic Outcomes in the Age of Mass Migration”
The Age of Mass Migration (1850-1913) was among the largest migration episodes in history. Unlike today, the United States maintained an open border in this era. We compile a novel dataset of Norway-to-US migrants and estimate the return to migration while accounting for migrant selection. Our first method compares migrants to their brothers who remained in Norway; our second exploits the fact that, under primogeniture, older sons in land-owning families were less likely to migrate. We find that these migrants, unhindered by entry restrictions, were negatively selected from the sending population, and that, in historical terms, the return to migration was relatively low during this period.

“A Nation of Immigrants: Migrant Assimilation and Labor Market Performance in the Age of Mass Migration” (in progress)
Conventional wisdom holds that mass migration contributed to economic growth in the United States in the late nineteenth century because migrants were positively selected relative to the native born. In this paper, we ask whether migrants outperformed natives in the labor market upon arrival and whether they had steeper earning profiles than the native-born. We follow the careers of Europe-to-US migrants from 21 sending countries and compare their occupation-based earnings with those of natives. Typically, this comparison is complicated by the fact some migrants return to their home countries and such return migrants can be differentially selected. Our panel data of migrants make it possible to compare migrants who moved permanently to the US with natives. Moreover, we can infer whether return migrants were positively or negatively selected by comparing the earnings profiles of migrants in our panel data with the repeated cross sections, which suffer from attrition.