

## **The Son Also Rises: Surnames and the History of Social Mobility**

*Gregory Clark*

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What's so important about social mobility? Why should anyone care? Well, politicians have long been using social mobility as vindication for inequality. America has been striving to overcome inequality, but social mobility rates haven't changed much over the years according to Greg Clark, the author of *The Son Also Rises: Surnames and the History of Social Mobility*. Clark, a Professor of Economics at the University of California – Davis, argues that social mobility and inequality are independent of each other. He suggests that rather than try to improve social mobility rates, institutions, and the government should focus on policies that will influence inequality.

First of all, every country and every society within a country has a different way of assigning a social status to those within their group. Imagine two people, both males age twenty-five. Let's call the first guy Adam and the second one Ben. Adam has been working for the

same large sales company since he graduated high school, working his way up to becoming a manager. Ben, on the other hand, doesn't make an income. He just completed his master's degree and is pursuing a Ph.D. Which one of these men has the higher social standing? Adam makes more money than Ben, but Ben has more education than Adam. How do you compare income and education?

Many studies of social mobility have used wealth, income, occupation and education as indicators of social standing and to measure the degree of intergenerational social mobility. Clark believes that those four indicators can be misleading if used independently. One indicator can skew social status into being higher or lower than it should be. So Clark suggests an averaging of the four indicators. He does this through the use of surnames, as a representative of the four indicators.

The study considers that surnames hold certain types of information, such as social status. Since surnames are passed down from one generation to the next, with some exceptions, it is a means to measure social mobility. Clark and his collaborators track the position and representation of surnames by comparing the share of a surname, and its derivatives, in an elite (or underclass) group to the share of the surname in the general population. Surnames

were gathered for different time periods by surveying registries, examining historical documents and university enrollments, among other sources.

The expansive data set covers many generations and hundreds of years from nine different economies: Chile, China, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States and Taiwan Province of China. This allows for numerous comparisons to be made either by region and/or through historical ties. It even invites comparison among the various economies in order to analyze the differing factors that play a role in developing the composition of human capital. For example, one can look at how education has impacted social mobility rates in Sweden versus India; or the difference between modern day class systems of Taiwan Province of China versus China's "classless" society.

Clark's book reads like a collection of short stories intertwined with a study on surnames. The vignettes and historical tidbits he provides are informational and entertaining. For example, the book gives an intriguing look into the Gypsies of England and how the study on surnames debunks the myth that they are descendants of the Romany Gypsies. An important piece of evidence found is that one of the most common surnames in the gypsy community is Smith. Clark suggests that being a modern Gypsy in England is more of a lifestyle than anything else. The book divides itself into chapters covering countries and conclusions he formed throughout his study, from the lineage of Chaucer to social mobility in the times

of the Samurai.

Many readers have found Clark's conclusions to be controversial; the author even acknowledges that his opinions would spark some sort of debate. He concludes that social mobility is lower than what many other studies have found, but it isn't really his overall conclusions that are raising a few eyebrows. Some choice statements supporting his conclusions will have many readers questioning Clark's ideas. For example, at one point he goes so far as to mention that "social status does not change social competence" (p. 165). Clark reasons that there is a good probability that outcomes can be predicted at birth because he says social competence is inheritable. One might argue that nurture more than nature plays a role in determining social status. Then why do those seeking sperm donors pour through profile after profile looking at not only genetic makeup and health history, but also education, income and occupation? Clark jokes, "once you have selected your mate, your work is largely done. You can safely neglect your offspring, confident that the innate talents you secured for them will shine through regardless," (p. 14). He suggests that characteristics like ambition and talent are inherited and genetics plays a crucial role in determining one's fate.

Clark's conclusions also show the resiliency of status and the persistence of human capital, even when taking into account historical events that were intended to bring about economic and social changes. China's Cultural Revolution and other social, political conflicts

did little to impact long-term social mobility in the country. The attempts to eliminate discrimination and inequalities in China and other countries, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, had little to no effect on social mobility rates, but these changes caused the decline of elite groups over time. The study even considers various external factors such as social homogeneity in Japan and Republic of Korea and affirmative action initiatives in India that could alter mobility. Clark concludes that neither social homogeneity nor affirmative action contributes to higher social mobility rates.

One such affirmative action initiative he discusses is the reservation system in India. This system sets a quota for seats in institutions such as government and education to be reserved for underrepresented members of Indian society that includes but is not limited to: lower castes, females, and members of certain religions. Clark discusses the controversy of the reservation system, where some view it as more hurtful than helpful to the already disadvantaged, but the study concludes that without it status would be much more persistent.

The author's efforts to answer many questions involving social mobility provide a better insight

clusions. No matter if one disagrees or not with Clark's analysis, *The Son Also Rises* is a unique and interesting read. The book incorporates sociology, history and economics, but even those with a fascination with only names and genealogy will also find this book engaging.

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