
BOOK REVIEW



Mark Kritzman, Senior Editor

**THE SON ALSO RISES:
SURNAMES AND THE HISTORY
OF SOCIAL MOBILITY**

Written by Gregory Clark

(Reviewed by Savannah Smith)

Gregory Clark's most recent work is a challenging but insightful read that aims to discover how much an individual's fate is determined by the status of our predecessors. *The Son Also Rises* serves as a sequel to his earlier work, *A Farewell to Alms*, and seeks to measure social mobility rates by tracking family names over generations. He explores surnames across Sweden, the United States, Medieval and Modern England, India, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Chile—virtually covering all of his bases regarding social structure and governments. He concludes that social mobility rates relatively consistent across societies despite differing

social policies, and far lower than conventional research estimates. Tucked neatly between passages of borderline overwhelming amounts of data are thoughtful and provocative observations on societal opportunity.

Clark's book, which is frankly a statistical marathon, struck two surprisingly personal chords for me. Firstly, the concept of surnames as a measure of social mobility is mildly amusing as someone blessed with the most common surname in the United States (I wonder if the other roughly 2.5 million Smith's in America would share that feeling). The second chord rang loudly as I read through Chapter 7: Nature versus Nurture. I was adopted at birth and have often used the debate of nature versus nurture as a framework through which to assess my own potential. I was eager to explore this subject through

Clark's statistical, matter-of-fact perspective and draw new conclusions on a much larger scale.

Clark boldly begins his case by tackling the biggest argument against it: Sweden. The Nordic country is often lauded for their equal opportunity infrastructure, with free public education, low income inequality and progressive welfare policies. In other words, Sweden is assumed to have high social mobility. Clark cleverly assesses surnames in public tax data as well as the higher percentages of noble surnames in the legal and medical fields, to conclude that is not the case. Though Sweden may have a more "economically equal society," Clark claims that the rate of social mobility is far lower than previously reported.

To analyze social mobility in America, Clark identifies the

elite groups as: descendants of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, people of Japanese descent, descendants of individuals as of 1923–24 who had rare surnames, and descendants of individuals with rare surnames who graduated from Ivy League universities in or before 1850 (yes, Smith’s everywhere are taking this very personally right now). Clark identifies the surnames of underclass groups as Native Americans, black Africans whose ancestors came to the United States before the Civil War, and the U.S. descendants of French settlers who came to America between 1604 and 1759.

Using the same methods as for Sweden, Clark is able to measure the impact of discrimination and, later, the impact of institutional policies on social mobility for the underclass

groups. These observations differ in levels of disheartening. For instance, the rate of blacks graduating from medical school tripled in the 1970s as a result of affirmative action policies. Unfortunately, that spike in social mobility has not been sustained. As with Sweden, Clark concludes that the social mobility rates in the United States are much lower than conventional methods would suggest. He attempts to end the chapter on an optimistic note by pointing out that these rates are not declining.

For those with the statistical endurance, the second part of his book explores social mobility in several eastern cultures. Though the stories, structures, and surnames vary, the theme remains the same: social and political movements have very little impact on social mobility

rates. Chapter twelve discusses the relationship between family dynamics and mobility, with the discouraging lesson that “rags to riches” stories are the exception, not the rule. Chapter thirteen then explores some of these cultural exceptions, diving into the perhaps unprecedented status changes for Protestants, Jews, Gypsies, Muslims, and Copts.

Overall, I found *The Son Also Rises* to be interesting, albeit a bit tedious at times. With a heavy reliance on statistics, the chapters end up being a bit redundant—though only out of Clark’s determination to illustrate his point. In a time when equal opportunity is a common discussion, this book has the potential to serve as a reminder that we are far from solving the problem. With his evidence, however, we may be one step closer to understanding it.