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The Son Also Rises: Surnames and the History of Social Mobility (The Princeton Economic History of the Western World Book 49)

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6 Highlights

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summarized in table 2.1. They show that current social mobility in Sweden is very slow—no faster, as we shall see, than comparable estimates in the United Kingdom or the United States, and no faster than social mobility in eighteenth-century Sweden under monarchic rule.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 446

Surprisingly, despite Sweden's reputation as a model social democracy, a class of nobles is very much alive and functioning. The country has a formal guild of noble families, the Riddarhuset (House of Nobility) (figure 2.1). Though noble families have existed since medieval times, the modern Riddarhuset was created in 1626. From 1668 to 1865, it functioned as one of the four governing estates of the kingdom, analogous to the House of Lords in England. Since 2003 the Riddarhuset has been a private institution that maintains the records of the Swedish noble families, and lobbies on their behalf. In spite of Sweden's advances in gender equality, only men vote in the Riddarhuset, and only sons transmit titles to their offspring.

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Nearly one hundred years of Swedish social democracy has created a more economically equal society, but it has been unable to change the underlying rate of social mobility. The strong intergenerational persistence of status in a country after many years of generous public provision of opportunities and funding for education, at a level similar to that of other countries without such equalizing expenditures, suggests that the forces that determine intergenerational mobility must be fundamental to the formation and functioning of families. These may be forces that are impossible to alter.

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The startling observation in this data is that social mobility rates in China under communism, even with the execution and exile of significant numbers of the middle and upper classes, have been just as low as in countries that have not experienced such social turmoil. The Qing elite are still overrepresented at the top of Chinese society. In particular, despite Mao's best efforts, even in the machinery of central government, the thirteen Qing elite surnames are more prevalent than expected. Despite Mao's best efforts, "class enemies" are strongly entrenched within the current Communist government of China.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 3502

The samurai and kazoku show surprising persistence as elites in modern Japanese society, despite the samurai having lost any legal privileges by 1871 and the kazoku having lost theirs by 1947. In particular, if the descendants of the samurai constitute 5 percent of the modern Japanese population, then they could still constitute anywhere between 20 and 50 percent of modern Japanese elites. The homogeneity of Japanese society does not lead to a higher rate of social mobility than we observe in more ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse societies, such as the United States. Reinforcing this finding, Korea, another highly homogeneous society, again shows rates of social mobility that are no faster than in socially and ethnically fractured societies such as the United States.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4366

The persistence of high and low status for some groups in various societies would seem to contradict the simple law of mobility for social status. However, in each of the anomalous cases discussed above, there are factors at play that can make even extreme persistence consistent with the same universal tendency for families to regress toward the mean over time. Elites and underclasses seem to be created by mechanisms that select them from the top or bottom of the established status distribution. They can also be created, as in the case of the Gypsy/ Traveller community in England, by differential fertility between higher- and lower-status members of a group. Once established, these differences in social status can be maintained by marital endogamy, as seems to have happened with Christian and Jewish minorities in the Muslim world, or they can be maintained by selective movement between social groups, as in the case of Catholics and Protestants in Ireland.
