

# Podcast Interview: Thor Berger and Per Engzell

**PNAS:** Welcome to Science Sessions. I'm Paul Gabrielsen. The American Dream is founded on the idea that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of the circumstances of their upbringing. Yet, upward mobility varies substantially across regions in the US. It's a dream that's not limited to America although, again, realized to differing degrees in different countries. In a recent PNAS paper, Thor Berger and Per Engzell show correlations between the geographic patchwork of upward mobility in America and the ancestries that primarily settled those regions during the 19th century Age of Mass Migration. Further, the modern patterns in regional upward mobility reflect those of the home countries of the immigrants from 100 years ago. Berger, of Lund University in Sweden, explains how he became interested in this research.

**Berger:** I've always had this idea ever since I saw the map of opportunity in the US that this is also a map of the historical settlement patterns of European immigrants. I'm very happy now to see that idea sort of converted into an academic study.

**PNAS:** Berger and Engzell, of the University of Oxford, are both from Scandinavia and have both lived and studied abroad. Engzell tells his experiences.

**Engzell:** For me, one thing that has been striking in some of the experiences and interactions that I've had in universities, in particular, abroad is that it differs notably where people come from and how they ended up there. Where, in a country like the US, people will often wear as a badge of honor that they're first-generation college students, where in my native Sweden those instances are less remarkable simply because they are much more common.

**PNAS:** Berger explains the link between equality and economic opportunity used in their research. This link is depicted in what he calls the Great Gatsby Curve, so-named because of the upward mobility demonstrated by the title character of "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

**Berger:** It is widely believed that Americans tolerate higher levels of income inequality because it is offset by high levels of mobility. The Great Gatsby Curve is just a simple correlation that still really challenges this idea of the American Dream by showing that more unequal countries such as the United States tend to have lower rates of mobility

when more equal countries such as Denmark or Sweden tend to combine high levels of income equality with high levels of mobility.

**PNAS:** In their study, Berger and Engzell examined the geographic enclaves in which European immigrants to the United States settled in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Scandinavian and German immigrants tended to settle in the northern Midwest, for example, and Italian immigrants tended to settle in the Northeast.

**Berger:** Today, quite remarkably, when you ask Americans to identify their ancestry, their responses tend to track these settlement patterns in a very precise way. Places that report different ancestries today tend to resemble the countries that their European ancestors emigrated from 100 years ago when we look, for example, at income equality or intergenerational mobility. For example, places where Scandinavian descendants reside today are more equal and mobile while areas where British descendants live are more unequal and less mobile.

**PNAS:** Engzell says the reason for such a strong persistence of a source country's economic mobility over many generations may be due to the types of institutions that immigrants brought with them.

**Engzell:** I think it's fairly uncontroversial to say that the countries that achieve high mobility also share a number of institutional features. So, some of those features are fairly extensive social security nets, free access to education and health care, school systems that have more even quality and track at later ages. We also know that when these immigrants settled, they often did so in frontier areas that had limited existing institutions. A lot of basic social goods like healthcare, education, came to be organized around local ethnic communities or church communities. This makes it plausible that many of the institutions that we see at a local level in the US today trace their origin to these enclaves or these communities.

**PNAS:** The authors also looked at the outcomes for African-Americans in the regions they were studying, to see how people who did not share a region's majority ancestry experienced mobility. Berger explains what they found.

**Berger:** We find similar gradients in mobility across these places for African-Americans. So this, I think, really suggests that our results reflect differences between places rather than differences between people.

**PNAS:** Yet, Engzell says, as they continue to study the factors governing mobility in America, the culture of source countries may also exert an influence.

**Engzell:** We also see that Scandinavian ancestry of a place is correlated with indicators of social capital, which is sort of a community-level characteristic that includes things like voluntary organization, voting turnout. And we also find variation in mobility within the states, and not just across them. In trying to say whether it's policy or culture, I think it's both. Actually, the culture of a place affects which policies pass. In the end, it's about the political choices you make, or the choices you make as a community, or as a country. I think that's quite a positive and empowering message.

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