

My students are not the only ones who are mistaken about the prospects of rising. When researchers asked members of the public in the U.S. and Europe how likely it is to rise from poverty to affluence in their countries, the American and European respondents generally got it wrong. Interestingly, however, they got it wrong in opposite ways: Americans overestimated the chance of rising, and Europeans underestimated it.⁴⁴

SEEING AND BELIEVING

These results reveal something important about the way we understand social and political arrangements. We perceive the world in the light of our hopes and fears. At first glance, it might seem that people are simply ill-informed about the mobility that prevails in their societies. But what is interesting, what calls out for interpretation, is that the misperceptions have a certain shape. Europeans, whose societies are more equal and more mobile than the United States, are overly pessimistic about the possibility of rising, while Americans are overly optimistic. Why is this so?

In both cases, beliefs and convictions shape perceptions. Americans' strong attachment to individual initiative, together with their willingness to accept inequality, leads them to exaggerate the possibility of rising through hard work. Europeans' skepticism that individual effort conquers all, together with their lesser tolerance of inequality, leads them to underestimate the possibility of rising.