

Book review

Gregory Clark, A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World , Princeton University Press, USA (2007) ISBN 978-0-691-12135-2.

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Patents for invention go back to the 15th century but, given the extremely slow rate of technological change, only became important and assumed their present form after the Industrial Revolution in the UK, around 1760–1780, and subsequently elsewhere. However, historians have never agreed why this revolution first occurred in the UK at that particular time, rather than in ancient Rome, China, etc. Various explanations have been mooted, e.g. political stability, sophisticated financial institutions, low taxation, the rule of law, cheap coal supplies, etc. However, many other places had these features and no revolution occurred till after the UK – in fact many parts of the world still have not had one despite much effort by their governments and interested outsiders such as the World Bank and IMF.

Gregory Clark is an economics professor in California and has come up with a novel explanation based largely on a detailed study of the UK genealogical/historical records in the 1200–1800 period. In brief he notes that the UK (like all other pre-industrial revolution societies) were in the so called Malthusian trap, i.e. population increased till resources of food, etc. became scarce at which point malnutrition, disease, etc. reduced the population and the cycle restarted. Technological improvement was very slow and sometimes even regressed. In the UK the population tended towards 6 million at which point many were at or below the bread line. In fact the only periods of rapidly rising living standards were in the aftermath of a major catastrophe, e.g. the Black Death 1347–1349, when population fell and the survivors had greater individual shares. However, contrary to popular belief, the UK was a relatively stable society not greatly disrupted by warfare with substantial opportunities for upward mobility. Hence, the able and ambitious could rise in class and make money. All the genealogical data shows that generally the more money people made the more surviving children they left and thus, over the generations, an increasing percentage of the population were descended from the more affluent, i.e. those

who valued literacy and numeracy, working hard, saving, deferring gratification, not indulging in casual violence, etc. The only dissident wealthy group were the aristocracy whose main business was warfare and whose consequent death rate gave them poor reproductive success. Thus by 1750 the UK was a society having a high proportion with these cultural attributes and, despite the UK government having little concern with industrialisation, education, etc. the people exploited the numerous advantages the UK enjoyed and made the Industrial Revolution.

This may seem a rather bizarre explanation well removed from normal economics but there is a wealth of data to support his arguments and he does offer plausible explanations for inconvenient facts. For example, one of the most lucrative new UK industries was cotton textile manufacturing, which had achieved world wide dominance by 1850 despite the UK having to import cotton and where wages for fairly unskilled machine minders were far higher than elsewhere. As the UK was eager to sell the latest textile machinery to anyone in the world (and provide technicians, managers, etc.) it is surprising that the UK textile industry was not destroyed by overseas competition within a few years. However, it remained dominant till 1914 and was not badly affected till the 1930s. His explanation lies in the culture of the societies who started their own competing industries.

As a keen genealogist I was amazed to find this useful application for genealogical research, and as a historian of science and technology I was fascinated to find a novel explanation for the Industrial Revolution which led to our life's work in patents.

An interesting and thought provoking book.