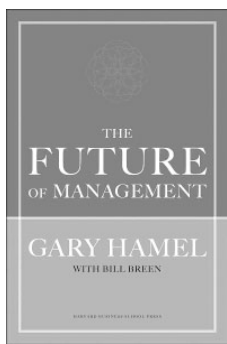


A6 OPINION/BOOKS

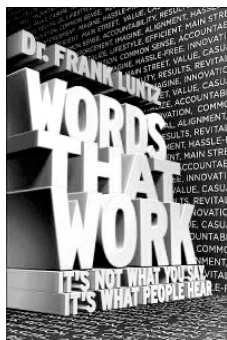
Business Books
TOP FIVE USA



1 The Future of Management

Do you want to help create the future of management? Line right up for some new ideas.

Gary Hamel and Bill Breen | Copyright 2007 Gary Hamel Summarized by permission of Harvard Business School Press 2007 | 288 pg. | ISBN: 9781422102503



2 Words That Work

How you say something is as important as what you say...an expert's practical guide to communication. Frank Luntz | Hyperion 2007 | 324 pg. | ISBN: 9781401302597

3 Go Put Your Strengths to Work

Build your performance at work by recognizing your strengths. Don't try to fix your weaknesses. Marcus Buckingham | Copyright © 2007 by One Thing Productions, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., N.Y. 2007 | 270 pg. | ISBN: 9780743261678

4 Your Money and Your Brain

How neuroeconomics can help you make lucrative investment decisions. Thinking for fun and profit. Jason Zweig | Copyright © 2007 by Jason Zweig Reprinted by permission of Simon & Schuster, Inc., N.Y. 2007 | 352 pg. | ISBN: 9780743276689

5 A Farewell to Alms

How culture explains the wealth and poverty of nations. Gregory Clark | Princeton University Press 2007 | 440 pg. | ISBN: 9780691121352

The rich-poor country 'puzzle': It's about greedy capitalism



Wan Lixin

wanlixin@shanghaidaily.com

THIS is a bold attempt at explaining why some countries are richer than others.

Contrary to one belief that the great divide is dictated by providential endowments, Gregory Clark turns to economic data for a scientific answer.

His "Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World" is a history of civilization from the "neolithic revolution" to the Industrial Revolution to today.

In examining why there was little economic progress before the Industrial Revolution and what caused the sudden economic growth in 19th-century Europe, Clark tries to rationalize the fact that some countries are so much richer than others.

The book, 20 years in the making, has been acclaimed as a revolutionary work of solid scholarship, though I believe that Clark's precious years would have been better spent on Karl Marx's "Das Kapital."

The sages East and West all agree that affluence and poverty are relative concepts, depending very much on the conditions of your neighbors rather than those of people in another hemisphere.

As Confucius said: "I have heard that the lord of a state or a family concerns himself with uneven distribution and not scarcity. Concerns himself with discontent and not poverty. For where there is even distribution, there is no poverty. Where there is harmony, there is no scarcity."

Greek philosopher Diogenes held that the virtuous life is the simple life. He discarded conventional comforts by living in a tub, which he carried about with him. He threw away his last utensil, a cup, when he saw a peasant drinking from his hands.

Recently in Chongqing a promotional sale of edible oil led to a stampede killing three people. A reader wrote in to say he couldn't understand why people waited for hours to save US\$1.55 for grease, which is after all not good for their health.

Does he know that the richest country on earth has already sunk US\$1.6 trillion in a war for grease? A war that has killed tens of thousands of innocent civilians — for a kind of grease that is nonedible?

It needs little imagination to recognize that the greedy are forever in a state of poverty, while the contented are forever being well-provided.

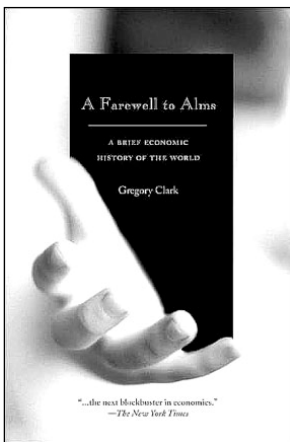
The concept of a rich country is also questionable.

Driving an expensive car is one of the symbols of the good life in some countries. But all car owners would be put in their place when they know some could afford to fly in Learjets

And all this personal strife pales before the Saudi billionaire prince who has ordered an Airbus A380 as a "fly-



Illustration by Zhou Tao/Shanghai Daily



ing palace" for himself.

There is no end to this rat race of wealth.

The most bewildering thing is that the author is not totally blind to this disquieting truth.

"Foraging and shifting cultivation societies had a form of 'primitive affluence' ... measured in the abundance of leisure as opposed to goods," Clark reflects after explaining the stunning lack of progress in preindustrial human societies in the "Malthusian Trap."

Later on Clark also observes with great penetration that "high incomes profoundly shape lifestyles in the modern developed world. But wealth has not brought happiness. Another foundational assumption of economics is incorrect."

He cites the example Japan where income per person has risen almost sevenfold since 1958, while surveys show general happiness has slightly declined.

But these sporadic flashes of insight are largely anecdotal, as something not central to the author's main thrust of argument. Otherwise, he might have observed that the speed of income increase is forever outpaced by the heightened sense of want.

The recurring theme of the book is

"The author's "more plausible" answer lies in the social environment: English workers were simply more conscientious and disciplined than Indian workers."

why a few countries became spectacularly rich while many countries stayed poor or, like some African nations, became poorer.

When Clark continues the serious business of justifying this puzzling fact, he waxes self-congratulatory.

The author's "more plausible" answer lies in the social environment: English workers were simply more conscientious and disciplined than Indian workers. In other words, the difference is cultural.

Unfortunately English cultural traits had not yet become widespread in many poor countries, despite the fact that centuries ago the English had sent gunboats to some less enlightened countries to spread the gospel of discipline and conscientiousness.

But one doubt remains: if English workers are so desirable, when labor was in short supply on American plantations in the South, why did the capitalists sail to Africa, rather than England?

Karl Marx long ago gave a more convincing explanation of the secrets of primitive accumulation in capitalist societies.

One of the greatest Chinese classic scholars Qian Mu once observed: West-

ern capitalism simply must be predicated on alien races and alien societies, for it needs to pillage others' wealth to add to its profits.

When we combine what Marx and Qian said, we have the answer Clark had been groping for in the dark for these last 20 years: most countries are poor because this will enable a privileged few to amass fabulous wealth.

The author's notion of progress should also be refined.

The book claims that even without significant technological progress, human society in Europe was changing slowly in ways that would set the stage for the Industrial Revolution, in part because of filth.

Before the Industrial Revolution, for instance, it was common in London to use one's basement as a cesspit. People rarely bathed.

The awareness of hygiene and cleanliness affords some members of the privileged race the greatest cause for condescension towards races of an "inferior" quality.

A civilized person, to my understanding, refers to a person who drives a sedan to work, stays in an air-conditioned office most of the day, so that he or she can earn enough to cure obesity, or go to a beach to cure his sickness from overwork. Typically, these people take two showers a day.

But I am less sure if they are cleaner than, say, a typical Chinese farmer. While a Chinese farmer can almost fully subsist on a plot of land, generating virtually no waste — even human waste is used as fertilizer — his more civilized counterparts are guilty of several evils. Consider the amount of water contaminated, the amount of energy consumed, and the amount of waste produced.

It is apparent that much so-called progress is founded on the satisfaction of needs that are being steadily created.

getAbstract
compressed knowledge

➔ To buy the abstract version or the book, please visit www.getabstract.com. The list is based one-third on Amazon sales ranking, one-third on getAbstract rating, one-third on getAbstract customer downloads.