

Book Reviews

GENERAL AND MISCELLANEOUS

A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World. By Gregory Clark. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pp. xii, 420. \$29.95, cloth.

Gregory Clark has written a stimulating, provocative, witty, and ambitious book. It is accessible to the uninitiated and a pleasure to read. Clark's valuable insights are presented with an admirable forcefulness, as are his grievous errors. In short, this is a book very much worth reading for the sake of argument and debate; it is a brief, but not a reliable, economic history of the world.

The design of *A Farewell to Alms* is simple. The world, for as long back as one cares to go (Clark believes that the economic behavior of our distant, preagricultural ancestors is revealed by contemporary hunter-gatherer peoples), has been held in thrall by Malthusian forces dooming mankind to the draconian tradeoffs of the preventive and positive checks. Clark describes this familiar model with unflinching logic and fresh examples. Then, around 1800 in Britain, the Malthusian forces were banished by a sudden and continuous increase in the supply of technological improvements. Clark offers a novel explanation for the spread of a "wave of gadgets" across Britain in these years. Finally, Clark addresses the limited diffusion of Britain's achievements to the rest of the world. The new technologies had the technical capacity of being used anywhere in the world, he argues, but this has not happened. Instead, a great divergence has occurred, making the many still-Malthusian economies even more poor than before (modern medicine has lowered the subsistence income of the Malthusian equilibrium) while permitting modern economies to grow without apparent limit—but without thereby making their prosperous inhabitants any happier.

Clark devotes nearly half the book to the Malthusian model in order to persuade his readers that the economic history of the many centuries, yea, millennia, preceding 1800 was simply so much futile thrashing about: every good deed was quickly punished, while sloth and vice were perversely rewarded. This was so, of course, because every action that increased income provoked a demographic response (higher fertility and lower mortality) that increased population and forced per capita income back down. Demographic historians of Western Europe have found that, in fact, both the birth-income and death-income schedules tended to be quite flat. Population change before 1800 was largely accounted for by shifts in these schedules rather than movement along them. Such an environment, influenced by exogenous shocks, is not quite the same as classic Malthusianism and opens up strategies of escape. Clark dismisses all this rather peremptorily and shifts attention instead to the fertility and mortality differences of rich and poor at any given time. That is, he moves from a model of societal demographic behavior over time to focus on demographic behavior by wealth status in the cross section.

This brings us to the heart of Clark's analysis of how the world escaped from this *histoire immobile*. Basing himself primarily on a study of 645 male testators in Suffolk, Clark found that wealthy men left more surviving male heirs than did their poorer contemporaries. He then satisfies himself that this pattern was representative of England since the eleventh century and argues that this superior reproductive power of rich men was not characteristic of China, Japan, or India. For some reason, he does not consider polygamous societies, where the English pattern, driven in part by remarriage, would be even more pronounced because of the multiple wives of the well-off.

Clark draws a direct causal line from the superior demographic reproduction of rich men in preindustrial Britain to the diffusion of "middle-class values" of patience, hard

work, literacy, and ingenuity through a society that had originally been characterized by violence, sloth, laziness, innumeracy, and impetuosity. Just how the rich gentry and landowners came to hold middle-class values is not explored, nor does he dwell on the dismal reproductive success of Londoners and other urban residents, surely more plausible bearers of middle-class values. Gradually, over many centuries, the bearers of the dysfunctional characteristics (or, Clark delicately proposes, genes) died out, to be replaced by the numerous elite progeny of the bearers of middle-class values. Clark makes the obligatory disavowal of social Darwinism as “misguided,” but he relies on it nonetheless to explain how, roundabout 1800, a clever, self-controlled, industrious people suddenly and without warning pushed the supply curve of productive innovation forcefully to the right and brought the long Malthusian night to an end.

This argument is unconvincing. Clark puts it forward, it seems, because he dismisses every conceivable alternative explanation. He turns the Malthusian model into a veritable iron cage, is contemptuous of all variants of institutionalism, rejects religion or the Enlightenment as factors of influence, and dismisses the impact and potential of all pre-1800 technological advances. By his ingenious calculation technology improved productivity by a grand total of 24 percent between the birth of Christ and the Industrial Revolution (p. 140). Having inflicted grievous damage to all these possibilities, Clark is left with a fundamental problem. He adheres to the “hockey stick” theory of world history: millennia of stasis followed by a sudden growth inflection beginning in 1800. But he also embraces an endogenous theory of economic change whereby settled agricultural societies across Eurasia gradually, over very long periods of time, developed in profoundly path-dependent ways the cultural forms (or genetic properties) that support modern economic growth. Britain’s advantage over the others resides, he argues, in its long peaceful and institutionally stable history. Clark holds to a rare position—Jacobite whiggism—in his dismissal of the importance of civil war, Glorious Revolution, or any other political or military events to Britain’s leadership. He goes on to declare that the “sudden discontinuity of the Industrial Revolution is an illusion” (p. 239). This illusion is the product of historically contingent factors, primarily Britain’s rapid population growth around 1800. All of this should lead him to find deep historical roots to the modern economy, but his embrace of radical Malthusianism prevents him from doing so. Hence, his embrace of a “sleeper” process that evolves undetected for centuries before surfacing around 1800.

The book’s final section will be less novel to those familiar with Clark’s articles on labor productivity across countries in cotton spinning circa 1900. While the key to the Industrial Revolution was improved technology, the key to its profitable diffusion, Clark argues, is labor efficiency. Deep-seated social factors (still, the result of differential reproductive performance in the distant past?) prevent poor countries from making effective use of advanced technologies. His argument is persuasive for the India of 1900, but is it equally compelling today, when these same countries are major industrial exporters while rich countries export raw materials, foodstuffs, and services? Perhaps the below-average reproductive success of the rich since the demographic revolution in western countries is beginning to show its effects.

The interdisciplinary character of economic history is a source of great academic strength and *A Farewell to Alms* offers a dazzling combination of clever economic reasoning, astonishing historical research, and resourceful appeals to anthropology. Still, one cannot suppress the thought that had this book been written by an historian its subtitle might have been: *Some Findings from Suffolk Testators, 1620–1638*.