

GREGORY CLARK

*A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World*

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. xii + 420 p. \$29.95.

The opening sentence of *A Farewell to Alms* states, "This book takes a bold approach to history." The author does not mislead the reader. After referring to other works with a similar aim, such as *The Wealth of Nations* and *Das Kapital*, Clark notes, "All these books, like this one, ask: How did we get here? Why did it take so long? Why are some rich and some poor? Where are we headed?" (p. ix).

Although considering all these issues in varying degrees, the book is primarily an attempt to describe the nature of economies before the industrial revolution and of those that arose in its wake, and in particular to explain how and why the transition took place. Clark argues that in all preindustrial economies the bulk of the population was miserably poor and that this was because of the "Malthusian trap." Advance in production technology was slow, much slower than the rate at which population could rise if living conditions were benign. Any rise in living standards ensuing for whatever reason was foredoomed to be brief, as rising numbers increased the pressure on a limited productive capacity. Paradoxically, anything that raised mortality was beneficial because it moderated and might, if sufficiently high, prevent population growth and thus preserve living standards. Thus, "Those scourges of failed modern states—war, violence, disorder, harvest failures, collapsed public infrastructures, bad sanitation—were the friends of mankind before 1800" (p. 5). Because population growth was not contained in England c. 1800, "for the majority of the English ... conditions were no better than for their naked ancestors of the African savannah" (p. 2). The truth, it has been said, to be made visible must first be coarsened, an injunction that Clark takes to heart in this book.

Although stated in especially stark terms, Clark's view of the relationship between economic and demographic variables that condemned the bulk of the population to poverty is essentially similar to that of the classical economists. Adam Smith, for example, wrote that "Every species of animals naturally multiplies in proportion to the means of their subsistence, and no species can ever multiply beyond it. But in every civilized society it is only among the inferior ranks of people that the scantiness of subsistence can set limits to the further multiplication of the human species; and it can do so in no other way than by destroying a great part of the children which their fruitful marriages produce" (Smith, I, 1961, p. 89). Ricardo was very clear in dismissing the possibility of sustained growth because all forms of economic expansion necessarily increased pressure on the land, which must mean either taking poorer land into cultivation or using more intensively land already in use, either of which must eventually entail decreasing returns to both capital and labor, thus bringing growth to a halt and condemning most people to live in want. This state of affairs would "necessarily be rendered permanent by the laws of nature, which have limited the productive powers of the land" (Ricardo, 1951, p. 126).

Malthus was, perhaps surprisingly, the least adamant of the three in dismissing the possibility of a permanent improvement in living standards. The taking of the first census in 1801 showed him that he was mistaken in his belief that the

growth rate of the English population was declining and pressing harder against a limited productive capacity. This led him to eschew *a priori* arguments in his later writings. He therefore abandoned the rather rigid stance that he had taken in the *First Essay*, acknowledging that it was quite possible to imagine an equilibrium situation in which living standards were well above subsistence. He had published the *First Essay* as a young man in a fit of irritation with those who followed some of the supporters of the French revolution in supposing that human societies could be radically changed and improved by institutional reform. His knowledge of demographic matters was greatly extended in the wake of the furor that followed his first publication. He became aware that there were long-term "oscillations" in the economic-demographic system during which real wages might improve or decline for several successive decades. At the close of a favorable oscillation it was not necessary to assume a plunge toward subsistence levels of living: "From high real wages, or the power of commanding a large portion of the necessaries of life, two very different results may follow; one, that of a rapid increase in population, in which case the high wages are chiefly spent in the maintenance of large and frequent families; and the other, that of a decided improvement in the modes of subsistence, and the conveniences and comforts enjoyed, without a proportionate acceleration in the rate of increase" (Malthus, 1986, V, p. 183). Malthus in this respect was considerably less "Malthusian" than Clark.

In reaching a less rigid view of the constraints to which all organic economies were subject, Malthus was influenced by the realization that marriage could play a major role in widening the range of possible outcomes. Where the timing of marriage for women was largely determined by the attainment of sexual maturity and few women remained unmarried, fertility levels were unlikely to be as sensitive to changing economic circumstances as where age at marriage varied in response to economic signals and where a variable, but sometimes substantial proportion of each rising generation might never marry. In those European societies in which it ran counter to established norms for two married couples to live under the same roof, marriage normally involved establishing a new household. This imposed an economic barrier to marriage that might be difficult to surmount. When conditions were unfavorable, marriages were often delayed and an increased proportion of the rising generation was constrained to forgo marriage. In early modern England the secular trend in first-marriage rates varied in close harmony with the comparable trend in real wages (Wrigley, 2004, fig. 3.7, p. 78). Clark is, of course, well aware of the nature of the European marriage system, and explains the effect *ceteris paribus* of a decline in fertility in causing real incomes to rise, but does not recognize the extent to which a suitable marriage system could ameliorate conditions of life for the mass of the population. In part as a result of the prevailing marriage regime, the living conditions of the poor in early modern England were very different from those in hunter/gatherer communities, and in most respects better.

Given Clark's insistence on the absence of significant improvement in the conditions of life for the bulk of the population before the industrial revolution, a special interest attaches to his account of the escape from the Malthusian straitjacket and the emergence of the "modern world." In this account demography also plays a major

role: Clark treats it as the driving force in spreading the bourgeois values of thrift, prudence, self-discipline, and hard work. That such values became widespread in society, in his view, was largely due to the much higher net reproduction rate (NRR) among the wealthier groups in English society when compared to the poorer sort. Because the NRR of the better-off was high, many sons and daughters in each generation were forced downward on the social ladder, carrying with them attitudes conducive to the kinds of change that collectively serve to explain the advent of the industrial revolution. It is difficult to regard this argument as acceptable. The evidential base is slim, based as it is on the wills made in the archdeaconry of Suffolk in the first half of the seventeenth century. There are serious problems in translating lists of those mentioned as legatees by testators in their wills into reliable estimates of NRRs, the key statistic in this regard. But even if this evidence were clearcut and authoritative, to carry conviction the exposition would need to cover many other points that are barely mentioned or not discussed at all. For example, it would be necessary to provide evidence that those who were downwardly mobile retained the values of their youth and especially that their children in turn did so. Again, the NRRs of bourgeois groups elsewhere in Europe must by implication have been lower than in England, since otherwise the same process might be expected to have occurred more widely. It would be necessary to demonstrate this assumption to give cogency to the argument.

There are also wider issues to be considered if this demographic explanation is to carry conviction. For example, Clark summarizes the evidence for the spread of literacy in early modern England. Assuming that bourgeois attitudes were indeed crucial to bringing about more rapid economic growth, why should not the wide readership of authors like Defoe have fostered the spread of bourgeois values as effectively as the lower fertility of those who enjoyed high incomes? Increasing urbanization was also conducive to the spread of market-oriented attitudes. In such circumstances it is idle to give preference to a monocausal explanation because of the feedback between a range of related factors whose interplay precludes giving priority to any one of them. More generally, in identifying bourgeois values as the key variable in making radical economic change possible, it is necessary to relegate to subordinate roles an impressive list of additional factors that others studying the industrial revolution have advanced, either singly or in combination, as explaining its occurrence. In a more extended consideration of Clark's thesis the claims of these other explanations should also be discussed, but space limits what can be covered in this review.

Although I do not find it easy to concur with Clark's argument, it would be churlish not to pay tribute to the width and vigor of his treatment of the perennially fascinating question of how the industrial revolution can best be understood. As no doubt he intended, by expressing his thesis in a combative, even provocative manner he has ensured that everyone who reads the book, those who disagree no less than those who are persuaded, will benefit greatly from doing so.

At the heading of the first chapter of the book there is a characteristic, pithy quotation from Dr. Johnson. It put me in mind of another remark attributed to him. When invited to give his judgment on a recently published book, Johnson is said to have replied that it was both interesting and original, then to have paused briefly

before adding: “but what was original was not interesting, and what was interesting was not original.” Clark may rest assured that no such remark could possibly be made about this fascinating volume.

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*Childbearing Trends and Policies in Europe* (Special Collection 7, *Demographic Research*, Volume 19, July 2008)

Rostock, Germany: Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, 2008. 1178 p.

In 2005 the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research initiated a large-scale project focusing on European fertility trends and their determinants. Three years later the Institute has published its findings in the form of a special volume of its own electronic journal, *Demographic Research* (see «<http://www.demographic-research.org/special/7>»). Volume 19 is exceptional by its sheer size: it contains eight overview chapters and 19 country reports encompassing nearly 1,200 pages. As is often the case with such large enterprises, the quality of the contributions is uneven, but there are no pieces that could justifiably have been omitted from the collection. Nonetheless, on several key topics a more thorough comparative analysis would have made the volume even more valuable.

A first set of overview chapters describes trends in European fertility, parity distributions, and aspects of household formation, from both period and cohort perspectives. These chapters stress the diversity within the continent, with basically a major divide between a group of Northwestern countries whose period fertility levels never fell below 1.5 children per woman and are now all in the range of 1.7 to 2.0; and all the others—comprising Southern Europe (without Albania), Central Europe (here including Germany and Austria), and Eastern Europe—which dipped in most cases well below the 1.5 threshold.