

Book review

G. Clark, *A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of The World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ (2007) xii + 420 pp.

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To write an economic history of the world is an ambitious task and it is not surprising that the result is neither as innovative nor as exciting as the author and publisher would like the reader to believe. At times, the exaggerated claims made for this book become irritating; it is particularly silly that the main title has clearly been chosen for effect and that there is no reference to alms, or charity, in the book at all.

The thesis of the book is a simple one. For most of human history, people have lived in a Malthusian world. Then, in a sharp break with the past – contrary to most recent literature on the subject – the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century produced rapid economic growth, allowing man – and womankind to escape from a subsistence economy. However, this economic growth has not benefited every part of the world; indeed, the world is a less equal place now than it was in the Malthusian world. The book thus poses two main puzzles, which have preoccupied many other authors: first, why did the Industrial Revolution occur and, second, why have its benefits not been spread universally?

Clark laudably seeks, as he writes in his introduction, to write in a jargon-free style, which will make his ideas accessible to non-economists. By and large, he succeeds in this task, although his use of the term “subsistence wage” in discussion of the Malthusian world may be confusing. It could be read as implying that people in that world were teetering on the edge of starvation when, as Clark makes clear, the Malthusian world was consistent both with innovation in food and other production and with capital investment in infrastructure. Clark

is insistent, however, that living standards in the Malthusian world were, if not stable, at least without any consistent long-term trend of improvement. He amasses much evidence in support of this view, but seems unwilling to admit at least that, despite this evidence, different societies chose very different methods of distributing available resources. The Athens of Demosthenes, the Rome of Nero, the Byzantium of Constantine or the Holy Roman Empire of Frederick Barbarossa are not, in any real sense, comparable to ancient or modern hunter-gatherer societies, as Clark seeks to argue.

However, readers of *Economics and Human Biology* are likely to be most interested in Clark's solution to his first puzzle, that of the origins of the Industrial Revolution. It is something of an achievement to come up with a new explanation for the flowering of economic growth in western Europe, particularly Great Britain, in the second half of the 18th century; after all, the topic has preoccupied generations of scholars, from Adam Smith, Lord Macaulay and Karl Marx onwards and has been the subject of intensive study by economic historians. Briefly, Clark's thesis is that, within the Malthusian world, the upper classes were more successful in breeding than the lower classes, in the sense that they had more surviving children. Over many generations, this led to the gradual diffusion of bourgeois ideas, favourable to economic growth, through the population.

This is an arguable proposition. Eyebrows may be raised, however, by Clark's suggestion, sometimes firm and sometimes tentative, that this process of diffusion was one of Darwinian evolution, in which bourgeois ideas in some manner became gradually "hard-wired" into a larger and larger fraction of the population until, finally, some tipping point was reached and, bingo, the Industrial Revolution was triggered. The problems with this are manifold. First, Clark does not cite any biological or neurological literature which might support such an evolutionary explanation. Second, although Clark refers to the process as one of Darwinian evolution, it seems closer to the Lamarckian concept of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, a thesis which has been discredited since the 19th century. While the genetic revolution has greatly enhanced our knowledge of the human genome and spawned many theories about the nature and speed of evolution, it has not so far supported Lamarck nor demonstrated genetic evolution in humans within the relatively few generations between the middle ages and the Industrial Revolution, the time period over which Clark suggests that this evolution might have occurred.

The evolutionary thesis also offends against the rhetorical principle that one should avoid redundancy. One does not need to evoke genetic evolution when the diffusion of ideas across time and space through economy and society can do the

job just as well. However, it is obviously more novel to assert that the Industrial Revolution stemmed from genetic evolution than it would be to suggest that it sprang from the diffusion of ideas; after all, Tawney and Weber, to name but two, have been there before Clark, with their theories of religion and the rise of capitalism. And it is clearly novelty that Clark is seeking.

Oddly, however, Clark does not adduce the same explanation for his second puzzle, that of the failure of worldwide diffusion of economic growth and the increasing inequality of living standards between countries in the modern world. It would seem natural to conclude, after 300 pages of argument for a genetic explanation, that this failure and inequality has stemmed from the lack of genetic evolution in countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America similar to that which occurred in western Europe. Clark sometimes comes close to such a view, for example in a discussion of why productivity in Indian textile factories is so low despite the efforts of the best western managers, but even he shies away from suggesting a genetic explanation for his second puzzle. It must be less acceptable to argue that different ethnic groups have evolved in ways more or less favourable to economic growth than it is to argue that, in western Europe, upper-class genes replaced lower-class ones and thus facilitated growth. Unfortunately, his failure to argue such a thesis leaves him with no explanation at all.

It would be unfair to be too critical. Clark has shown great ambition, has amassed enormous amounts of evidence through assiduous archival research and is never less than thought-provoking. He is also almost wholly successful in writing in a style which is elegant and jargon-free. But, at the very least, his central thesis must be regarded as, in the words of Scottish law, not proven.