

THE RICH ARE DIFFERENT FROM THE REST OF US

Review of *A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World*,
by Gregory Clark (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007)

Many will recognize the title of this review as F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous reference to *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1995), to which Ernest Hemingway is supposed to have retorted, "Yes, they have more money." Greg Clark, it seems, is prepared to side with Fitzgerald; the rich *are* different from the rest of us. Clark argues that the rich possess a set of potentially inheritable traits—work ethic, ingenuity, education, and patience—that the poor do not, and the reason that England industrialized when it did (and why other nations did not) was simply the result of "good" genes. What is undeniable, and perhaps more in line with Fitzgerald's intention than Clark's, is that the set of social norms that govern the behavior of individuals varies not only from nation to nation but between different social classes within a nation as well. So the rich are different from the rest of us. The question remains however, if growth-promoting social norms of the wealthy classes come to dominate in some nations why did they not in others?

As the title suggests, *Farewell to Alms* spans the economic history of man from roughly the beginning of the Neolithic revolution, when settled agricultural societies began, to the present, with an emphasis on the period leading up to the take-off that preceded modern economic growth. The text is divided into three sections, each addressing a specific question. The first is a detailed exploration of economic life under the Malthusian regime, the prehistoric period up to 1800. The second examines the period of modern economic growth, from the onset of the Industrial Revolution to the present day. The final, brief section discusses the causes and effects of the post-industrialization widening of global incomes.

Clark's hypothesis is simple and straightforward, in keeping with the tone of this work which should be accessible to academics in a variety of disciplines, students at all levels, and non-academics alike. He proposes a tipping point theory¹ of evolutionary biology using a survival of the fittest argument: wealthy successful men produce more children that live to child-bearing age. He argues that, as a result, behaviors, such as greater work hours (diligence), higher savings rates (patience), higher literacy (the importance of education), and innovativeness (ingenuity) came to predominate over time in the nations which industrialized first, principally in England. In his view the transition from a predisposition of the wealthy class to societal norms for all classes was aided by the downward mobility of the children of the wealthy into the more common classes. The end of the eighteenth century, he suggests, is the tipping point for human economic advancement, the point at which these qualities became sufficiently prevalent in some nations as to have an overwhelming effect on living standards. Other nations, such as Japan and China, did not advance along the same trajectory despite evidence

¹A theory in which a critical point is reached beyond which change is irreversible.

that up until 1800 the stage was set for just that, industrialization throughout Asia as well as Europe (Hanley, 1974; Pomeranz, 2000; van Zanden, 2003; Allen, 2005). Clark hypothesizes that Asia did not evolve in the same direction as England because wealthy, successful men in those societies neither produced significantly more children than men in lower classes nor experienced the same downward mobility. Clark writes, “Thus we may speculate that England’s advantage lay in the rapid cultural, and potentially also genetic, diffusion of the values of the economically successful throughout society in the years 1200–1800” (p. 271).

It does not serve the book well to dwell on the rebuttal of its evolutionary arguments. Not because they are incontrovertible; on the contrary, because of the lack of conviction with which they are promoted. Clark’s conclusions are provisional, everywhere confined to conjecture and probability rather than certitude. No evidence is presented to support the contentious claim that behavioral traits, such as ingenuity, are even weakly inheritable.² Nor is there any evidence that these traits are more prevalent in the wealthier classes, modern or otherwise. There is sufficient support for evolutionary tipping points in the literature, yet none is provided in the text.³ Clark is not trying to convince the reader that beyond a shadow of a doubt his evolutionary theory resolves the debates surrounding industrialization, but rather uses these theories to throw fuel on the fire in hopes of raising the debate to a new level, presumably one in which we do not rely on purely exogenous explanatory factors.

While some argue that the period known as the “Industrial Revolution” was neither industrial (Clark, 2007) nor revolutionary (Mokyr, 1990), there is general consensus that at some point between 1760 to 1830 the long era economic stagnation that had dominated human history came to end in what is now known as the “developed world.” Literature in this area has primarily focused on addressing the comparative questions posed by David Landes (1969), and argued by Crouzet (1967): Why did this happen first in Western Europe (and not Asia for example), and why did this change occur when it did? Landes credits innovation in the British cotton industry for motivating the shift in production away from domestic producers to larger scale factory production and the subsequent economy-wide improvements that resulted. Crouzet argues that various factors, accumulating over the long period leading up to the Industrial Revolution, lead to a greater superiority of British inventiveness; a view supported by Landes who argues in favor of greater technical skill and innovativeness on the part of the British. Kranzberg (1967) argues in favor of a “multiplicity of factors—technological, social, economic, political, and cultural—which came together in the mid-eighteenth century to provide the stimulus for industrial advance” (p. 78). This multiple factor view is consistent with Ashton (1948), who argues in favor of a long-run lead up to the Industrial Revolution, and writes: “The conjuncture of growing supplies of land, labour, and capital made possible the expansion of industry; coal and steam provided the fuel and power for large-scale manufacture; low rates of interest, rising prices, and high expectations of profit offered the incentive. But behind and beyond these material and economic factors lay something more. Trade with foreign parts

²For more on this debate see Rose *et al.* (1984), Dawkins (1989), Pinker (2002), and Kaplan and Rogers (2003).

³See, for example, Gould (2002).

had widened men's views of the world, and science their conception of the universe: the industrial revolution was also a revolution of ideas" (p. 16). The view that resource and geographic determination, specifically the location of coal reserves, spurred industrialization in Britain is reiterated by Pollard (1980).

More recent theories seek to find single determining factors that might explain the timing and location of the industrial revolution. Some argue that innovations in the institutions that protect intellectual and physical property rights advance the argument that the timing of the industrial revolution was a response to largely exogenous shocks (see, for example, North, 1991). Jones (2001) recognizes that the institutions that promoted innovation were improving, but suggests that within that framework, a virtuous circle in the production of ideas and the size of the population brought an end to stagnation. Mokyr (2005) believes that the timing is related to the Enlightenment in Europe but would also argue that the "historical origins of the knowledge economy" (Mokyr, 2002) were as much a response to economic conditions as a determinant. Galor and Weil (2000) propose that growth in per capita income was made possible by the reduction in fertility levels as parents, in response to (presumably exogenous) accelerating technological progress, substituted away from low to high quality child rearing.

Galor and Moav (2002) present a Malthusian framework, in which some parents invest in child quality and others in child quantity. Where the quality types are wealthier than the quantity types, the quality types produce more children, despite their preference for lower quantity. If children inherit their parents' type, then over time the distribution of types in the population changes in favor of quantity types, increasing investments in human capital and fueling the rate of technological progress. Clark adds to the timing debate by suggesting that the evolution in types reached a tipping point near the end of the eighteenth century. He argues against the reliance on external factors, such as exogenous institutional innovations, and instead seeks to find the solution in endogenous, potentially biological factors. If an individual who possessed more productive values was more economically successful, and if that economic success led to reproductive success (which is in fact the Malthusian hypothesis), then these values were transmitted to a group that was increasing its representation in the population over time. Generation by generation, the children of the wealthy, who possess these qualities, were becoming more numerous.

It is commonly believed that economic life, the world over, was governed by the Malthusian mechanism from the beginning of history to the onset of the Industrial Revolution. The first part of this text is an excellent introduction to the empirical evidence that describes this period. While others' work may be criticized for failing to incorporate evidence for living standards beyond income measures (see Inwood, 2002), Clark's cannot. The book presents compelling evidence for wages, leisure, stature, caloric (and protein) consumption, longevity, and fertility over a remarkably long period.⁴ In addition to confirming the persistence of the Malthusian "scissors," Clark finds evidence for some gradual change in this world of stagnant living standards. From about 1600 onward, the return on land and land rental charges suggests a steadily declining real rate of return. Clark argues

⁴Evidence for the earliest periods, the Pleistocene and Neolithic eras, is abstracted from data on modern hunter-gatherer and subsistence farmers.

that the fall in interest rates is the result of an increasing subjective rate of time preference, households increasing their willingness to postpone consumption—or slowly becoming more patient. He also finds an increase in numeracy and literacy over the same period, despite the seemingly consistent skill premium. The evidence on work hours is weaker, but certainly work hours are higher in Europe in the later part of the pre-industrial era than for foragers and early agriculturalists.⁵ He argues that violence is declining as well, both in the form of homicide rates and in terms of the taste for judicial violence.

Others have argued that the change in values (see, for example, Weber, 1958; Mokyr, 2005) influenced the climate of growth at the onset of the industrial revolution. Clark agrees, but as he writes, “Ideologies may transform the economic attitudes of societies. But the ideologies are themselves also the expression of fundamental attitudes in part derived from the economic sphere” (p. 183).

Alternative theories of growth used to explain the industrialization process are introduced briefly in the second section (specifically exogenous, endogenous, and multiple equilibrium theories). Two chapters warrant special attention, however: the chapter that attempts to explain why China, India, and Japan did not industrialize at the same point in history (which addresses the “Why Western Europe?” question), and the chapter on the social consequences of the industrial revolution. Contrary to the widespread belief that industrialization favored the owners of capital, Clark argues the opposite: that capitalization favored low-skilled workers.⁶ Early foragers had no land ownership and very little capital. Societies were inherently equal (evidence from modern forages bears this out). With the onset of the Neolithic Era, and the widespread adoption of settled agriculture, inequality increased as land assets increased in the share of income. Industrialization, however, significantly diminished the value of land in production and increased the importance of labor income, a resource with which we are all (relatively) equally endowed. The wage of low-skilled workers increased with capitalization, while the returns to land fell, and within-nation income inequality fell. This argument, that industrialization benefited the lower income classes, is supported with the evidence that not only did the relative wage of unskilled workers increase in the post-Malthusian era, but that these workers saw relative gains in stature, life expectancy, child survival, and literacy. On why Asia did not industrialize at the same time as Western Europe the answer is a simple, but contentious, claim that the economically successful classes in Asia did not produce significantly more children than the less successful classes. In these societies the reproductive advantage lay not with those who had the most wealth, and supposedly the most productive system of beliefs; apparently, the Malthusian mechanism that ties increased fertility with income did not play as significant a role in Asia as in Europe.

If the industrial revolution served to narrow the income gap within nations, the opposite is true for the income gap between nations (see Bourguignon and Morrisson, 2002). The period following industrialization has been deservedly termed the “Great Divergence” (Pomeranz, 2000). From 1800 to the present, the gap in material living standards between the richest and the poorest nations has increased at least tenfold. The final section of the text examines the circumstances

⁵See Clark and van der Werf (1998) and Clark (2005) for more on work hours.

⁶Others have argued this as well. See, for example, Acemoglu (2002).

that led to that divergence and comes to one conclusion: despite the persistent belief that poor political and social institutions are to blame for the economic performance of underdeveloped countries, the evidence from the dawn of that divergence does not support that claim, nor has the attempt by policy makers to impose “good institutions” on poor nations had the desired effect. Clark puts the blame for this divergence squarely on the shoulders of the labor force; countries that grew the slowest over the previous 200 years are those that produced the lowest level of output per unit of capital. He describes this as differences in “social capability,” borrowing the phrase used by Abramovitz (1986) to describe “the attributes and qualities of people and organizations that influence the responses of people to economic opportunity, yet originate in social and political institutions” (Temple and Johnson, 1998, p. 966).⁷ Clark, however, has already dismissed social and political institutions as largely endogenous responses to real incentives. So when he speaks of social capability, what he is really describing is *capability*; workers in high-income countries are more capable than workers in low-income countries independent of institutions. There is no ready explanation for this difference, and Clark sensibly does not attempt to revisit his genetic arguments of the previous section.⁸ Instead he suggests that economies (read labor forces) alternate between “relatively energetic phases and periods of somnolence” (p. 370). For example, Clark suggests that the reason the Irish economy has grown so quickly over the past decade is simply the result of a workforce shedding its lackadaisical ways. This may be true, but if we do not permit that workers are responding homogeneously to incentives, and we rule out the effects of social and political institutions, then, stated or not, the biological explanation looms. Clearly more work is required on this issue before the results move into the sphere of useful knowledge.

So what is the mechanism that determines the evolution of social norms over time? We share a common ancestry; we have all descended from a small band of hominids living on the African savannah, and yet our cultural beliefs across societies vary, suggesting that social values have evolved with our physical beings.⁹ If we accept that the emergence of production-oriented values provide the conditions necessary for industrialization, then Clark’s system of norms, passed through the

⁷The book concludes with a discussion of happiness, or more specifically of the failure of increases in absolute income to bring us more happiness on average. On this front, we might learn something from Keynes. In contemplating the economic prospects for the future in light of the remarkable growth the industrial revolution produced, Keynes in 1929 wrote of the economic “bliss” we would eventually achieve and that as the result of continued long-run growth he would see us free “. . . to return to some of the most sure and certain principles of religion and traditional virtues—that avarice is a vice, that the extraction of usury is a misdemeanour, and that love of money is detestable, that those [who] walk most truly in the paths of virtue and sane wisdom who take the least thought for the morrow. We shall see once more values ends above means and prefer the good to the useful. We shall honour those who can teach us how to pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well, the delightful people who are capable of taking direct enjoyment of things, the lilies of the field who toil not, neither so do they spin” (Keynes, 1963, p. 7). Perhaps our failure to achieve happiness in light of growth is not so ironic after all.

⁸Clark suggests that the only option available to alleviate poverty would be for the developed world to liberalize immigration policies. Potentially, however, if the most successful members of society are lured away by the West, then surely Clark’s theory would predict even worsening stagnation of these sending countries. Policy alternatives not suggested by Clark, but rather by his theories, might be significantly less palatable. For example, economic inequality within a nation might have the potential benefit of promoting growth if the standard of living of the poor is insufficient to allow the genetic survival of these less successful classes and the genetic advancement of those with growth-promoting attributes.

⁹For an introduction to the genetic versus cultural transmission debate, see Rogers (1988).

lineage of a reproductively successful class, is valid. This validity does not rest on accepting the claims to the inheritability of behaviors. It merely requires the reader to accept that, either through nature or nurture, children acquire the values of their parents. Clark demonstrates how the preferences of one specific economically successful class might have come to predominate among the other classes through reproductive success and downward intergenerational mobility. The most important data, in respect to this argument, is collected from wills probated through the courts in the period 1620–38. The wills report the occupation of the testator (all male), the size of the bequests, the marital status, the number of surviving children, and the literacy of the testator. Clark divides testators into “rich” and “poor,” where rich is defined as holding more than the median level of the assets of £100 (roughly equivalent to the value of 10 acres of land) in the sample. Rich men lived longer, married younger women, and had more children per year of marriage than poor men; rich men who were married for more than 20 years had on average 9.2 children compared to 6.4 for poor men. The data also suggest significant downward intergenerational mobility which ensures that these offspring are not starting life with a greater level of assets than the children of poorer men. Therefore, according to Clark, what matters to growth is not wealth in and of itself, but rather personal qualities such as patience and industriousness that are transmitted within social groups independently of the adult wealth of the offspring.

For those who might be concerned that when speaking of the wealthy Clark is referring to the gentry or noble classes in pre-industrial England, a closer look at the probate data reveals that the occupational groups with the largest number of surviving children are in fact merchants and farmers (Clark and Hamilton, 2006, p. 724).¹⁰ Merchants and farmers are, at least anecdotally, projected as being hard working and thrifty. This evidence, combined with Clark’s assertion that these families passed productive qualities onto their children, is consistent with Crouzet’s claim that the majority of early industrialists were descendants of these middle (occupational) classes (Crouzet, 1985) rather than either the gentry or the landless class. Clark drops the discussion of occupation in the book, and focuses solely on wealth, but the distinction is important for those who might mistakenly believe “wealth” is synonymous with “nobility.” This distinction becomes important when the evidence from England is compared with that from China where the fertility rate data consists entirely of records of royal births from the Qing Dynasty. That evidence suggests that the wealthy in Asian societies did not experience the same reproductive advantage as in England. The occupational data however suggests that a direct comparison of royal births in England, say for the Stuart dynasty, might reveal a different story, that the fertility rates of royalty are not representative of the fertility rates of successful men overall.¹¹ Thus, without directly comparable

¹⁰Anecdotally at least, the British nobility do not appear to exemplify growth-promoting qualities. Doepke and Zilibotti (2007), for example, describe the pre-industrial landed class as being “averse to work, unwilling to save, ill-disposed to commercial activities and unable to consider money as something to be profitably invested” (p. 1).

¹¹The link between fertility and assets at death presented in Clark appears to exclude residents of London (see Clark and Hamilton, 2006, p. 722). The evidence for China, however, is exclusively from residents of Beijing (Lee, Campbell and Wang, 2004). Clark establishes a strong link between urban residence and child mortality for England (London testators left on average 1.96 children compared to 2.39 for town and 2.92 for rural areas). This correction for urban versus rural fertility does not, however, appear to apply to China.

fertility rates of the “economically successful” in Asia (as opposed to those simply fortuitous in birth), the evidence for an evolutionary advantage is inconclusive.

Some evidence for the (non-biological) transmission of economic values from parent to child exists in the literature but is absent from the text. For example, Kofi and Hurst (2003) find that the strong correlation of savings behavior between parents and children is as much a function of children mimicking their parents’ behavior, as anything else. Doepke and Zilibotti (2007) argue that altruistic parents shape their children’s preferences (specifically for leisure and patience) conditional on material circumstances, suggesting preferences that we observe to be “social norms” are the equilibrium solution to a maximization problem in which children’s lifetime income enters the parents’ utility function.¹² Akerlof (2007) describes individual decision making as being not simply a function of the maximization of utility over real outcomes, but as based on people’s opinions as to how they, and others, should or should not behave. He writes, “Such views are called *norms*, and they may be individual as well as social . . . people tend to be happy when they live up to how they think they should be; and they are, correspondingly, unhappy when they fail to live up to those norms” (pp. 8–9). This suggests that outside of material circumstances, individuals will maximize over a utility function that includes a preference for behaving in a manner that corresponds with their social group, or perhaps the social group into which they were born. Bisin and Verdier (2001) find that, if the family and society act as substitutes in transmitting values to children, then a social group which is in the cultural minority will socialize children more intensely with that group’s norms relative to the group whose norms are representative of those of the majority, independently of material circumstances, and that the existence of heterogeneous preference groups is globally stable. The wealthy classes might very well have socialized their children to adopt their values, independent of the expectation of future wealth of those children, and those values could have played a larger role in the economic decision-making of those adult children than of the adult children of the poorer classes with similar levels of income.

One potential extension of Clark’s work would be to explore the role played by the wealthier classes in shaping the values promoted by the Church of England. The argument that religion played a role in the dissemination of capitalist values is not new; most are familiar with Weber’s (1958) argument that Reformed Protestantism (particularly Calvinism) was the seedbed of cultural values that, if nothing else, promoted modern capitalism. Mokyr (2002), however, argues that “religion is itself partly endogenous to the economic stimuli and incentives, and any crude notions based on the assumption that culture itself is fixed and a literal interpretation of Weber’s thesis are unpersuasive” (p. 249). The pulpits of the pre-industrial England were filled with the sons of Clark’s reproductively successful classes. According to Chibi (1998), 73 percent of church bishops during the reign of Henry VIII were sons of merchants, tradesmen, and yeomen farmers. Downward mobility in these occupational classes virtually ensures they were at least equally well represented in the lower orders of the church. If the values of these churchmen influenced the teachings of the church and led to the promotion of values such as patience, hard work, respect for education, and openness to

¹²This does not describe how the norms of one class can come to predominate, however, as each “set” of material circumstances will warrant the acceptance of an individual set of social norms.

innovation by the church, then these values could have been spread down the social classes through a mechanism that moved beyond genetics and family socialization. It might explain why such growth-promoting preferences came to dominate in other social classes when the socialization argument, at least, would suggest that the impact on subsequent generations would diminish over time.¹³

The question is not simply, is the biological hypothesis wrong, the answer to which even Clark seems willing to accept is maybe, but rather is the biological hypothesis “productively wrong”? To those who struggle with the notion that good luck is responsible for bringing an end to thousands of years of economic stagnation, the answer to this question is almost certainly yes. Clark contributes to our understanding of the issues surrounding the timing and location of the industrial revolution, a knowledge which is fundamental to understanding the process through which living standards have increased over time in some countries, and decreased in others. Even without the biological hypothesis, the warning here to other researchers is that to ignore social norms is to overlook a potentially significant contributor to both growth and stagnation. While Clark is not a voice in the wilderness on this point, through his assessment of savings rates, work hours, and literacy and numeracy rates, he provides compelling evidence for the evolution of societal norms which determine savings in the 300-year period leading up to the industrial revolution and a framework for thinking about how social norms might be transmitted within social groups within a society. He forces us to think about the transmission of values (within and potentially between nations) in a way that is necessarily distinct from the transmission of institutions or government policies that can be (potentially) externally imposed. In this light the book raises some difficult issues regarding the shortcomings of international intervention in less developed nations as well as issues surrounding the potential impact on well-being of the emerging class systems in the developed world. If the initial reaction to the book is anything to go by, the success of *Alms* will be to bring these debates into the public sphere.

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¹³Other European countries did not see this movement of the merchant and farming classes into the roles of church bishops. For example, in Castile in the same period, 73 percent of bishops were either royalty or nobility, with few coming from merchant and farming classes.

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