

Clark, Gregory: *A Farewell to Alms. A Brief Economic History of the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007. ISBN: 978-0-691-12135-2; 432 pp.

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One of the biggest questions economic historians can try to answer is why the Industrial Revolution – and the unprecedented economic growth that came with it – did occur in 18th century England, and not in some other place. And why did industrialisation not make the whole world rich but, on the contrary, rendered large parts of the globe even poorer? Some of the best economists, social scientists and historians have tried to solve this mystery – by providing entirely controversial answers.¹ Now Gregory Clark, professor for economic history at the University of California, Davis, has attended to the puzzle. He aims, he says, at writing a big history, in the tradition of Adam Smith's „Wealth of Nations“ or Karl Marx's „Das Kapital“, whose purpose is to lay out a universal interpretation of the course of economic development. Clark meets this challenge by claiming that, „fortunately . . . , a simple set of ideas can carry us a long way in explaining the evolution of the world economy through the millennia.“ (p. X) What ideas are those and how convincing are they?

The book is organised in three sections. In part one, Clark explains how until the Industrial Revolution, the Malthusian Trap was responsible for the fact that short-term gains in income made through technical advances were inevitably lost because of population growth. Only the Industrial Revolution brought about a fundamental change and led to a growth of material consumption per person in the industrialised societies without precedence. But why did this revolution take place in Europe? Clark surprises the reader with his first argumentative somersault by maintaining that the answer lies in the precarious sanitary situation in pre-industrial Europe: „Europeans were lucky to be a filthy people who squatted happily above their feces“ (p. 6), since due to the high mortality

rate, income had to be divided among fewer people. The Japanese on the contrary with their highly developed sense of cleanliness maintained their level of population, which is why the average person was condemned to live on a much more limited income. Furthermore, in Clark's eyes the high mortality rate was beneficial to Europeans, because it led to a downward mobility of cultural habits that favoured economic progress. Since, as Clark puts it „the economic laws governing human society were those that govern all animal societies, mankind was subject to natural selection throughout the Malthusian era“ (p. 6). In England, the richest people had twice as many surviving children as the poorest. As a consequence, children of rich men had to move down the social hierarchy in order to find work. In a bewildering recourse to Social Darwinism he claims that therewith the attributes that would ensure later economic dynamic – patience, hardwork, education – were spread biologically throughout the population.

In part two, Clark brings forward why this mechanism, rather than institutional stability, gave Europe an advantage over Asian countries such as China or Japan, which until 1800 were heading in the same direction as England: toward a society embodying values of diligence, honesty and rationality. Europeans, however, had a culture more conducive to economic growth since in Asia the members of the upper strata were only modestly more fecund than the mass of the population. Thus, there was not the same cascade of children from the educated classes down the social scale as Clark has depicted for Europe in part one of his book.

In part three, the author tackles the question why, until today, some countries are rich whereas others are even poorer than before the Industrial Revolution. His answer to this question is that, while machines could be easily transferred to most of the world, the social environment that motivated people to cooperate at the workplace could not be replicated as easily. Clark illustrates this with the example of Indian factories, where throughout the

¹ For instance Karl Marx, Max Weber, Eric Williams, Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, Douglass C. North, Kenneth Pomeranz or David Landes.

20th century the output of the average worker is much below that of workers in Western industries.

Clark's book has found a very positive resonance in the Anglo-Saxon world² and has been a Winner of the Gold Independent Publisher Book Medal in 2008. However, his astonishing mélange of Weberian work ethics with Malthusian and Darwinian ideas leaves one an uneasy feeling. If cultural traits acquired over the centuries played such a deciding role, as Clark argues, how can we explain the rapid industrialisation of Japan at the end of the 19th century, or the quick economic development of South Korea, China or India at the end of the millennium? Furthermore, it is hard to believe that an economic historian would write a book about the Industrial Revolution and global inequality without once referring to the oppressive aspects of colonialism or the fatal effects of Western protectionism to industries of developing countries throughout the second part of the 20th century. Historians such as Eric Williams or Immanuel Wallerstein have raised unpleasant questions about the role of the exploitation of the Southern hemisphere for the rise of Western capitalism, and although their approaches are afflicted with problems of their own, do they bring factors into equation that Clark's work is neglecting completely.³ But the names of these scholars are not mentioned once in the book nor are their works cited in the references. It seems that the warm welcome the book has found in some circles comes not least from the fact that it discharges the West from every responsibility for the grinding poverty most people on the globe are living in until today. If the reason for their situation lies in the genes or in the cultural patrimony of the Western World then, alas, there is nothing to be done against it. This is probably the most vexing aspect of this book.

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² A collection of more than fifty reviews of the book can be found on the author's website: <http://www.econ.ucdavis.edu/faculty/gclark/a_farewell_to_alms.html> (18.03.2009).

³ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Chapel Hill 1944; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 3 Vols., New York 1974-89.