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### PROJECT

## The Conquest of Nature: A Brief Economic History of the World

The basic outline of world economic history is surprisingly simple. Before 1800, income per capita for all societies we observe fluctuated, but there was no upward trend. The great span of human history was lived in societies caught in the Malthusian trap. Jane Austen may write in England in 1813 about refined conversation over tea served in china cups, but for the mass of people then material conditions were no better than it had been for their ancestors in the African savannah. The Darcys were few, the poor plentiful. Then came the Industrial Revolution. Incomes per capita began a sustained growth in a favored group of countries around 1820. In the last two hundred years, in the most fortunate countries real incomes per capita have risen 15 fold. But prosperity has not come to all societies. Indeed there is good argument that living conditions for the poorest countries in the world are lower now than for the typical society before 1800. This divergence in fortunes since the Industrial Revolution has recently been labeled "the Great Divergence". Thus world economic history poses three interconnected problems that this book explores: the long persistence of the Malthusian trap up until 1800, the escape from that trap in the Industrial Revolution, and the consequent Great Divergence. Explaining the Industrial Revolution also implicitly requires explaining the Malthusian Trap and the Great Divergence that followed.

### Recommended Reading

Clark, Gregory. "Why Isn't the Whole World Developed? Lessons from the Cotton Mills." *Journal of Economic History* 47 (March 1987): 141-173.

Wolcott, Susan and Gregory Clark. "Why Nations Fail: Managerial Decisions and Performance in Indian Cotton Textiles, 1890-1938." *Journal of Economic History* 59, 2 (June, 1999): 397-423.

Clark, Gregory. "Common Sense: Common Property Rights, Efficiency, and Institutional Change." *Journal of Economic History* 58, 1 (March, 1998): 73-102.

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### COLLOQUIUM, 04.07.2006

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

### The Malthusian Era: 100,000 BC to 1800

The talk will start with three elementary and seemingly innocuous assumptions about pre-industrial societies. It will be shown that, in combination, these assumptions have powerful predictions. They imply an economic system, the Malthusian economy, alien to modern intuitions. In particular before 1800 technology progress should have had no effect on living standards. Good government, charity, order, and public health provision should enhance misery. In contrast war, famine, pestilence and death were the friends of mankind, and could result in living conditions that

were good even by modern standards. The talk will also show how to measure the rate of technological advance in the Malthusian era. This will confirm that technological advance was indeed extraordinarily slow before 1800.

Since the three assumptions underlying the Malthusian account sketched above also apply to all animal populations, before 1800 human and animal societies had the same economic laws. Thus human society, since it was Malthusian, was also Darwinian. The long Darwinian struggle that helped define human nature continued right up to 1800.

This Darwinism will be demonstrated for England in the years before 1640, in the form of "survival of the richest." The richest 10 percent of pre-industrial English families nearly doubled their share of the population in each generation, over centuries. Consequently the Malthusian world was probably one of strong downward mobility. The present population of long settled agrarian economies as in Europe, China and India is likely mainly the offspring of those economically successful in previous generations.

Finally, and more tentatively, the implications of the particular nature of this Darwinism in settled, institutionally stable, pre-industrial societies for the breakthrough to modern economic growth will be explored. The fundamental preferences of people seem to have changed in the years leading up to the Industrial Revolution: people became more patient, and more interested in goods than in leisure. Thus the thousands of years delay between the development of stable agrarian societies dominated by private property rights and markets, and modern economic growth, may be explained by the gradual evolution through culture, or even through genes, of modern economic orientations.

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#### PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Clark, Gregory (Princeton, NJ [u.a.], 2007)

A farewell to alms : a brief economic history of the world

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=527480274>

The Princeton economic history of the Western world

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=527480274>

Clark, Gregory (2005)

When did modern growth begin?

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=104721041X>