

Peter Laslett, review of 'Savage Wars of Peace', *American Historical Review*, vol.104, no.1, Feb. 1999.

Under this dramatic and unrevealing title, one of the most accomplished anthropological historians of our time addresses two critical historical questions. How could any traditional, pre-industrial society spontaneously escape from the Malthusian trap? How far can that question be answered by comparative analysis of the only two instances of countries that accomplished the feat, that is to say, England and Japan? The book appears to be the crescendo of a highly successful writing career which began in 1976 with a monograph on the Gurungs of Nepal, followed two years later by perhaps the most radical study ever made of a subject in British social history, *The Origins of English Individualism*. Within a decade, two further highly original and iconoclastic studies appeared, *Marriage and Love in England* (1986) and *The Culture of Capitalism* (1987). The conventionally minded historian a decade further on now faced with the present title might cry out "He's at it again! What next?"

These are not quite the appropriate exclamations, because there are no historians' holy cows trampling the field of analysis as to how the menace of overpopulation was originally overcome nor as to why the two nominated countries managed it, although they had such vividly contrasting cultures. Insofar as there is an accepted solution to the crux between population and subsistence in England, it is industrialization itself which is invoked. Indeed, as Tony Wrigley has insisted, Thomas Malthus was the first to recognize and describe the dilemma at just the time and in the country where it was being overcome by spontaneous industrialization, something which Malthus himself did not identify. But Japan did not undergo indigenous industrialization and when the development came, it was mimetic of the by then well established, originally English model.

These are circumstances which complicate Macfarlane's intricate problems even further. But he is extraordinarily effective in threading his way through the complications, showing a mastery of an enormous range of detail, technical and otherwise; ideological, productive, economic, dietetic, medical, epidemiological, agricultural, military, political – the list goes on and on. He carries his reader with him, however, at all points, and his lengthy text is full of illuminating, original, and surprising things. He is, for example, the first writer about the past, as far as I know, to venture a chapter on human excrement, that extremely valuable nutrient for crops, which underwrote the Japanese food supply, though it was rejected as disgusting by the English. So carefully was it treasured in Japan, he tells us, that a would-be bridegroom was reminded as he went away from a courtship visit to be sure to piddle on a family field if he was taken short on his way home. In that society, Macfarlane says, though I find it hard to believe, the smell of shit was not repellent.

There are other inconsistencies between his two cases. But the features he finds to be in common decidedly carry the day. He takes as his framework the inventory set out by Malthus himself of the catastrophes inevitably ensuring in a traditional society from its uncontrollable numbers, war, disease, and famine in all their manifestations. These elements are treated through what seems to be every single minute detail of the two economies, societies, and ideologies, with persuasive judgements at each particular point as to how the threat posed was warded off. Some of the conclusions may seem to be trivial; indeed, one of them – that the two societies were shielded

from sickness and starvation by drinking tea – has been laughed at by one or two reviewers.

Let it be said that the adoption of the cups that cheers is not proposed as the crucial reason why these two developments occurred; if only because the whole discussion is directed against menopausal explanations. Great pains are taken to order the minutiae as to their significance in the analysis and the commanding likenesses between England and Japan, their status as islands, their early freedom from epidemic diseases, especially the plague, their avoidance of armed domestic conflict and conquest from overseas. The whole case is not set out as what might be called theoretical architecture, systematically relating the myriad items to an overall hypotheses. It is rather an anatomy of what might be called a syndrome, a syndrome the full understanding of which has yet to be arrived at. Such a judgement may well be rejected by the author, because in his final chapter on chance and change he sets out to convince you that after all he is dealing with a single highly complex causal network. Judgment on this claim must be left to his readers, who will find the argument a fascinating one, though I confess to a feeling that he has set himself a well nigh impossible task. Nevertheless, this is a very remarkable book by a very remarkable man.

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