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Economic History Field Exam, August 2017

Answer 4 out of 8.

1. The model presented by the Reverend Thomas Malthus, suggesting a negative relationship between population growth and living standards, is one of the most influential frameworks in all of economics. Some recent economists and economic historians (Michael Kremer, Gregory Clark) have launched fundamental challenges to this model. What are their critiques? What are their limitations?
2. In his influential work on demographic history, John Hajnal emphasized what he referred to as the “Western European marriage pattern” and its profound implications for family limitation. What is this pattern? What are its sources (what explains it)? Are it, or at least some of its aspects, really distinctive to Western Europe?
3. A strongly held consensus in the economics profession is that trade openness is positively associated with economic growth. (Even the skeptics, like Francisco Rodriguez and Dani Rodrik, argue only that the association is weak and unreliable, not that it is negative.) For the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in contrast, economic historians have documented a positive association between the height of tariffs and a country’s rate of economic growth. How robust is the evidence? What explains the contrasting patterns in the two periods? What is the source of this “tariff-growth paradox?”
4. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, labor productivity (output per hour) in agriculture was virtually identical in British and American agriculture. Yet labor productivity in manufacturing was 50 to 80 per cent higher in the United States than in Great Britain at the same point in time. What explains the difference?
5. Economic historians from Robert Fogel (winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Economics) to Dave Donaldson (winner of the 2017 John Bates Clark Award) have analyzed the role of the railroad in American economic development. Fogel downplayed its importance, while Donaldson reemphasized it. How could they reach such different conclusions? When Fogel’s methods have been applied to other countries, the conclusions reached on that basis differed. Would you expect the same to be true of Donaldson and Hornbeck’s methods?
6. Robert Gordon has suggested that the United States experienced “one big wave” of rapid economic growth in the century ending in roughly 1870, and that potential growth has been – and will remain – slower ever since. What is Gordon’s evidence? Is it convincing?

7. \*Philip Hoffman: *Why Did Europe Conquer the World?*
  - \* Robert Allen: *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective*
  - \* Ian Morris: *Why the West Rules--for Now*
  - \* Yuval Noah Harari: *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*

Consider at least two of these books. What sort of progress do they, collectively, make toward enhancing our understanding of the human history of the Great Transformation from agrarian Malthusian poverty to post-industrial global prosperity and modern economic growth? Do you think economic historians have or lack the tools to make progress toward enhancing our understanding?

8. Much of the current state of knowledge and opinion about American economic growth and inequality is (still) contained in two books:
  - \* Lawrence Katz and Claudia Goldin: *The Race Between Education and Technology*
  - \* Peter H. Lindert and Jeffrey G. Williamson: *Unequal Gains: American Growth and Inequality since 1700*

How do these authors reinforce and challenge each other in their conceptions of the history of American growth and opportunity? How are our readings of them shaped by the fact that we today now read them as, in some ways, responses to or challenges to Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*?