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Economic History Field Exam – Summer 2013

Answer one from Part 1, one from Part 2, one from Part 3, and one from Part 4.

Part 1

Gregory Clark and others argue that the world economy was essentially stuck in a Malthusian trap until the nineteenth century. Jan de Vries and others argue that this was not true, at least not for the period of the “Commercial Revolution,” which he situates in the period 1400-1800. Who has the better of this argument, and why?

How are we to understand the demography of the past five centuries—the staggered coming of the demographic transition to the different countries and regions of the world, the rise and then rapid fall of fertility during the demographic transition, the associated rapid fall in mortality, and the implications of these two factors for the overall rate of population growth?

Part 2

Robert Allen and others have argued that cheap fuel and costly labor help to explain the British industrial revolution. H.J. Habakkuk and others argue that cheap natural resources and costly labor help to explain the American System of industrial production. In what respects are these arguments similar? How do they differ from one another? If they are similar, how then can we understand how impressed British observers were by American machine tools and interchangeable parts when they encountered them in the mid-19th century?

What factors made the first two-thirds of the twentieth century an "American century," in the sense of seeing the United States with a considerable edge in productivity and wealth over the rest of the industrialized world?

Part 3

What similarities are there between the current financial crisis, recession, and slow recovery on the one hand and previous such episodes on the other? What lessons on how previous crises were handled do you believe have relevance for today? What lessons about how previous crises were not successfully handled do you believe serve as fruitful negative examples for today?

One thing that makes history unstable is that the more we learn about the present as time advances changes our view of what happened in the past. How is your view of the Great Depression different in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2007-2013 than your view would have been six years ago?

Part 4

What were Robert William Fogel's most important contributions, methodological and substantive, to the field of economic history? Which of Fogel's conclusions have stood the test of time and which ones have been overturned by subsequent scholarship? What are some examples of notable scholarship in recent years that drew inspiration from Fogel's work?

GPS (Global Positioning System) technology has recently been used by a variety of economic historians to reconsider classic questions in the field. What are some notable applications of GPS technology to economic history? Has the use of GPS technology allowed for significant advances in scholarship? If so, can you suggest some additional questions to which this approach might be applied?