

Preface

This book takes a bold approach to history. It discerns in a welter of often sketchy and sometimes conflicting empirical evidence simple structures that describe mankind's long history: structures that can accommodate the startling facts about human history and the present world detailed below.

Doubtless some of the arguments developed here will prove over-simple, or just false. They are certainly controversial, even among my colleagues in economic history. But far better such error than the usual dreary academic sins, which now seem to define the humanities, of willful obfuscation and jargon-laden vacuity. As Darwin himself noted,

false views, if supported by some evidence, do little harm, for every one takes a salutary pleasure in proving their falseness: and when this is done, one path towards error is closed and the road to truth is often at the same time opened (Darwin, 1871, Ch. 21).

Thus my hope is that even if the book is wrong in parts, it will be clearly and productively wrong, leading us towards the light.

This book is the product of twenty years of labor in a particularly obscure corner of the academic vineyard, quantitative economic history. I am fortunate the economics and history professions both so lightly regard these vines that a single scholar can claim whole centuries as their personal garden, and tend it reflectively and unmolested.

Though the book is about economics, the issues discussed are simple enough to be understood by any intelligent reader. Because the book also suggests that institutions, economic life, history, and current culture are intertwined the ideas here pertain to all the social sciences.