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## Towards a unified theory of economic growth: Oded Galor on the transition from Malthusian stagnation to modern economic growth

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**Towards a Unified Theory of Economic Growth:  
Oded Galor on the *Transition from Malthusian Stagnation  
to Modern Economic Growth***

By

Brian Snowdon

**Abstract**

An interview with Oded Galor on the development of unified growth theory.

**Keywords:** Unified Growth Theory, Population, Technology, Demographic Transition, Sustained Growth.

**JEL Classifications:** O40

## Background information

*What first attracted you to study economics?*

I was born in Israel in the midst of a geo-political conflict and vast regional inequalities and I was eager to get a better understanding of the world in which I live. My passion towards mathematics and philosophy and my interest in contemporary socio-political issues naturally led me into the branches of economics that integrate my passions and interests.

*Were there any specific individuals who influenced you?*

As Newton said, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." My attempt to develop a unified theory of economic growth was influenced primarily by researchers from other scientific disciplines whose attempt to develop unified theories had a profound effect on the way that we understand the world.

*Do you mean people like Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein?*

Precisely.

*Your models tend to be very mathematical. Presumably you have always had a strong math background?*

Indeed. I have been fascinated by various fields of Mathematics, and along the course of my education I developed significant expertise in dynamical systems.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, although my research tends to be rigorous mathematically, my extensive use of mathematical modelling is designed to subject the theory to proper logical scrutiny, without presenting a barrier to most readers. I tend to present my ideas and their foundations in a fashion that is excisable to the non-mathematical reader.

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<sup>1</sup> See Galor, 2007.

*In your recent research you have been concentrating on issues related to very long-run growth and development. What is it about this area that fascinates you?*

During the two decades that I have spent studying the process of development, I have become increasingly convinced that contemporary variations in economic development have deep roots in the distant past. I was determined to find coherent answers to the fundamental questions...Why are some countries poor while others are rich? What is the source of the dramatic increase in inequality across countries in the past two centuries? Are there lessons that can be learned from the growth experiences of the developed economies in order to alleviate the poverty in the less developed countries?

The inconsistency of exogenous and endogenous growth models with some of the most fundamental features of the process of development, has led me to a search for a unified theory that would unveil the underlying micro-foundations of the growth process in its entirety, capturing the epoch of Malthusian stagnation that characterized most of human history, the contemporary era of modern economic growth, and the underlying driving forces that triggered the recent transition between these regimes and led to the divergence in income per capita across countries.<sup>2</sup>

## **Economic history**

*In recent years there has been a revival of interest in economic history amongst many economists, including yourself and people like Daron Acemoglu.<sup>3</sup> Even Robert Lucas and Edward Prescott are writing about the Industrial Revolution.<sup>4</sup> Why do you think this has happened?*

Clearly, our understanding of the contemporary world is limited and incomplete in the absence of a historical perspective. However, the renewed interest in the interaction between economic development and economic history could be attributed to the

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<sup>2</sup> See Pomeranz, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Galor and Weil, 1999, 2000; Galor, 2005a; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006. See Snowden, 2007a, for an interview with Daron Acemoglu.

<sup>4</sup> Lucas, 2002; Parente and Prescott, 2005.

increasing frustration with the failure of the a-historical branch of growth theory to capture some of the most fundamental aspects of the growth process.

*Is history in general something that has always attracted your interest?*

Absolutely. I have been intrigued by the evolution of humans and societies since pre-history, and I devoted a significant portion of my time to read about our evolution from the emergence of early humans to the present.

### **Unified growth models**

*The exogenous and endogenous growth models of Robert Solow and Paul Romer were really developed to try and explain the growth process in the developed world.<sup>5</sup> For example, Solow was particularly interested in explaining the growth experience of the US in his 1957 paper. The work of Malthus effectively describes the world before 1800.<sup>6</sup> Why do we need a model that can explain both the modern and Malthusian growth regimes, as well as providing an explanation of the evolution of an economy between these regimes?*

There are several fundamental reasons for the quest for a unified theory of economic growth. First, a comprehensive understanding of the hurdles faced by less developed economies in reaching a state of sustained economic growth would be futile unless the factors that prompted the transition of the currently developed economies into a state of sustained economic growth could be identified and their implications would be modified to account for the differences in the growth structure of less developed economies in an interdependent world. However, as you stated, neither exogenous and endogenous growth models nor Malthusian models generate insights about the forces that permitted economies to shift from Malthusian stagnation to a state of sustained economic growth.

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<sup>5</sup> Solow, 1956; Romer, 1986, 1990. See also Snowdon and Vane (2005) for a survey of the Solow and Romer models as well as interviews with both economists.

<sup>6</sup> Malthus, 1798.

Second, imposing the constraint that a single theory should account for the entire intricate process of development and its prime causes in the last thousands of years is a discipline that enhances the viability of growth theory. The evolution of theories in older scientific disciplines suggests that theories that are founded on the basis of a subset of the existing observations and their driving forces may be attractive in the short run, but non-robust and eventually non-durable in the long run. The attempts to develop unified theories in physics have been based on the conviction that all physical phenomena should be governed by some underlying unity. Similarly, the entire process of development and its fundamental forces ought to be captured by a unified growth theory.

Third, a unified theory of economic growth reveals the fundamental micro-foundations that are consistent with the process of economic development over the entire course of human history, rather than with the past decades only. Similarly to the advancements that were made possible by the establishment of micro-foundations to models of macroeconomics, it will improve not only the predictions of growth theory but its policy implications.

*What do you consider to be the strengths of the Solow and Romer growth models?*

These models have been instrumental in advancing our understanding of the role of factor accumulation and technological progress in the process of development in the modern era and in sustaining economic growth in the long-run. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that they are inconsistent with the qualitative aspects of the growth process over most of human existence. In particular, in contrast to these models, during the Malthusian epoch capital accumulation and technological progress had a negligible effect on the long-run level of income and its growth rate, and they were counterbalanced almost entirely by an increase in the size of the population.

*People such as Nobel Laureate Douglas North regard long-run growth and change as the key issue in economic history.<sup>7</sup> With your unified growth model are you trying to produce a general theory of economic history*

I suppose so. My unified growth theory provides a general theory of the evolution of economies over the entire course of human history. But, in fact, it is even more ambitious than that. It goes beyond economic history and examines the interaction of economic and human history. As you know, some of my recent research has examined the interaction between long-run economic development and human evolution.<sup>8</sup> It demonstrates that in contrast to the viewpoint advanced in the influential work by Jared Diamond, the evolution of the composition of human traits in the process of development is a significant force in the transition from stagnation to growth and in the understanding of comparative development.

## **Growth regimes**

*In your unified growth models you distinguish between three growth regimes, namely, the 'Malthusian regime', the 'post-Malthusian regime', and the 'modern growth regime'. In general terms, before we look in more detail later, what are the main characteristics of each of these regimes?*

The Malthusian regime captures the early stages of economic development that lasted up until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century for modern developed economies, and until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for today's developing countries. The Malthusian regime describes a world in a low level equilibrium in terms of income per capita. Technological progress takes place, but very slowly. The growth of total output resulting from technological progress is matched by population growth so that per capita income fluctuates around a low stable level, with no significant progress in

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<sup>7</sup> Douglass North was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1993 (jointly with Robert Fogel) for 'having renewed research in economic history by applying economic theory and quantitative methods in order to explain economic and institutional change'. See North, 1990, 1994, 2005; Fogel, 1994. North writes... 'Understanding the process of economic change would enable us to account for the diverse performance of economies, past and present.... A real understanding of how economies grow unlocks the door to greater human well-being and to a reduction in misery and abject poverty'.

<sup>8</sup> Galor and Moav, 2001, 2002, 2005; Galor and Michalopoulos, 2006; Ashraf and Galor, 2007b.

average living standards over a long period of time. The post-Malthusian regime marks the initial take-off from the Malthusian regime. This is an era when technological progress accelerates and consequently we observe the beginning of economic growth in per capita income terms even though population growth is still positively linked to rising incomes. The modern growth regime is triggered by a rise in the demand for human capital and a demographic transition. This is the era of rapid technological progress, sustained economic growth and rising per capita incomes. Unlike the previous two regimes, population growth is no longer counterbalancing the growth of income per capita.

*Are there any countries in the world today that are still trapped in a Malthusian growth regime?*

Many less developed economies are still faced by the main element of the Malthusian trap. Namely, their population growth has an adverse effect on their development process. Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine in the short-run, whether technological progress in these economies or an increase in their available resources per capita (due to foreign aid, the discovery of natural resources, or increased mortality) would ultimately result in a faster rate of population growth that would offset significantly their output growth.

*Where would you locate China in terms of your regimes? Given China's remarkable economic growth during the last twenty five years, can we say that China has entered the modern growth regime?*

China has indeed crossed the threshold of the modern growth regime. It is experiencing rapid technological progress, human capital formation, and sustained output growth without any significant offsetting effects of population growth.

### **The Malthusian growth regime**

*The Malthusian regime dominates just about all of human history until we come to the Industrial Revolution. Malthus's famous book was published in 1798. Somewhat*



*ironically this was just about the time that the Malthusian regime was beginning to come to an end in Western Europe. So Malthus's theory is a pretty good description of human history before 1800, but not after the publication of his book.<sup>9</sup> When you are researching into this area are you conscious of this irony, that Malthus was writing down his growth model right at the time you identify as the beginning of the breakpoint between the Malthusian and post-Malthusian regimes?*

Indeed, this irony was one of the catalysts in my quest for a unified theory of economic growth. It made me realize that unless I will construct my theory on solid micro-foundations that capture diverse economic regimes, the theory is unlikely to survive a major shift in the economic paradigm, and the irony about the Malthusian theory may repeat itself.

*To what extent was an Industrial Revolution, and a consequent breakout of the Malthusian regime, inevitable?<sup>10</sup> Your Darwinian-evolutionary perspective also seems to imply that at some point a growth take-off was inevitable. Are the two approaches complementary?*

According to my unified growth theories the transition from stagnation to growth is an inevitable outcome of the process of development.

During the Malthusian epoch technological progress permitted an increase in the size of the population, while population size affected the rate of technological progress. The size of the population determined the supply of, and demands for, ideas. It also influenced the diffusion of ideas, the degree of specialisation in the production process that stimulated 'learning by doing',<sup>11</sup> and the level of international trade that further fostered technological progress. At the same time, the rate of technological progress and its effect on the resource constraint, enabled population growth.

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<sup>9</sup> For a recent discussion of Malthusian theory, see Galor and Weil 1999, 2000; Galor, 2005; and Clark, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> See also Kremer, 1993; Jones, 2001, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> See Arrow, 1962.

This inherent Malthusian positive feedback between the level of technology and the size of the population brought about a gradual acceleration in the pace of technological progress. Rapid technological progress, inevitably, raised the demand for human capital in the production process, in order to cope with the rapidly changing economic environment. The rise in the demand for human capital in the second phase of industrialization induced the formation of human capital, and led to a substitution, by parents, between the quality and quantity of children, triggering the onset of the demographic transition.<sup>12</sup> It brought about significant technological advancements along with a reduction in fertility rates and population growth, enabling economies to convert a larger share of the fruits of factor accumulation and technological progress into growth of income per capita, which paved the way for the emergence of sustained economic growth.

Similarly, the evolutionary growth theory that I have advanced suggests that the transition from stagnation to growth is an inevitable outcome of the effect of the process of development in the Malthusian epoch on the selection of traits that are complementary to the growth process, such as higher valuation for child quality, entrepreneurial spirit, and longer life expectancy.<sup>13</sup> Hence the transition is brought about by a gradual change in the composition of the population, and its effect on technological progress and human capital formation. It is interesting to note that the non-evolutionary perspective suggests that the adverse effect of limited resources on population growth in the Malthusian era delays the process of development, while the evolutionary theory suggests that the Malthusian constraint generates the necessary evolutionary pressure for the ultimate take-off.

*Even if an Industrial Revolution was inevitable, we still need to explain why it happened in Britain rather than China, which had a much larger population.<sup>14</sup> In a recent interview that I conducted with Joel Mokyr, he argued that much more important than population size was the intellectual climate that pervaded Western*

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<sup>12</sup> For an excellent discussion of the demographic transition, see Lee, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> See Galor and Moav 2002, 2005; Galor and Michalopoulos 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Maddison's (2001) data indicates that the population of China in 1000 and 1700 AD was 59 million and 138 million respectively, whereas the UK's population was 2 million and 8.5 million respectively. See also Maddison, 2007.

*Europe and Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.*<sup>15</sup> Douglass North emphasises the role of Institutions and the political impact of the Glorious Revolution in 1688.<sup>16</sup> Is there anything in your research which can lead us to an answer to the question...Why was Britain first?

Unified growth theory is a Meta theory, a skeleton on which one can hang different elements that have generated variations in the performance across countries, such as England's earlier industrialization in comparison to China.

The theory suggests that the timing of the take-off is determined by the effect of the size of the population as well as its composition (namely education, entrepreneurial spirit, and even intellectual spirit), on technological progress and its effect on the demand for, and the formation of, human capital. But clearly, in order to account for comparative development, we have open these two theoretical black boxes and fill them with the cultural, institutional, demographic, and policy factors that determine the intensity of each of these effects in individual countries or regions.

Indeed, in the absence of variations in these additional important dimensions, one may expect the first Industrial Revolution to take place in China. But once we allow for different institutions, policies, and cultural attitudes towards technological progress and education, then countries with large populations may nevertheless lag behind if they do not have the complementary forces that can stimulate technological progress, the demand for human capital, human capital formation, and fertility decline.

For instance, once a technologically driven demand for human capital emerged in the second phase of industrialization, the prevalence of human capital promoting institutions, such as public education, determined the extensiveness of human capital formation, the timing of the demographic transition, and the pace of the transition from stagnation to growth. Hence variations in the presence of human capital promoting institutions across the globe may have contributed to the European dominance in the transition from agriculture to industry.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, geographical

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<sup>15</sup> See Snowden, 2007b; Mokyr, 2005a, 2005b. See also Landes, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> See North and Weingast, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> See Galor, Moav and Vollrath, 2006.

variations may underline the earlier European take-off. Societies that were geographically vulnerable to cultural diffusion were characterized by diminished cultural assimilation, higher cultural diversity and lower accumulation of society-specific human capital. While reduced cultural assimilation diminished their performance in the technological paradigm that characterised the agricultural stage of development, their greater cultural diversity, fostered their ability to adapt to a new technological paradigm, accelerating their industrialisation and take-off to a state of sustained economic growth.<sup>18</sup>

*I was struck when reading your papers that you make frequent use of the ‘take-off’ concept. When I was a student, back in the late 1960s, discussion of Walt Rostow’s work was all the rage in economic history.<sup>19</sup> Rostow’s idea of various stages in the growth process, from primitive society, to pre-conditions for take-off, to the take-off, to the drive to maturity, and finally to the age of high mass consumption, at least stylistically, remind me of your growth regimes. Were you influenced by Rostow’s work?*

Although I do not think that I was influenced directly by Rostow, it appears that I have constructed my unified growth theory around stages of development that has some parallels to the ones that he had in mind.

### **The post-Malthusian growth regime**

*How does an economy finally breakout of the low-level Malthusian equilibrium?*

As I pointed out earlier, the post-Malthusian regime marks the initial take-off from the Malthusian regime. The reinforcing interaction between population and technology during the Malthusian epoch changed the size and the composition of the population sufficiently so as to support a faster pace of technological progress and generated the transition to the Post-Malthusian Regime. The growth rates of output per capita increased significantly, and although the positive Malthusian effect of income per

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<sup>18</sup> See Ashraf and Galor, 2007a.

<sup>19</sup> See Rostow, 1956, 1960.

capita on population growth was still maintained, the sizable increase in population growth only offset some of the potential gains in income per capita. The acceleration in the rate of technological progress increased the industrial demand for human capital in the second phase of industrialization, and induced significant investment in human capital and the onset the demographic transition.

*To develop a single structure that can encompass all these features must have been a huge theoretical challenge. What were the main complications that you faced?*

Indeed, the establishment of a unified growth theory has been a great intellectual challenge. It required major methodological innovations in the construction of dynamical systems that could capture the complexity which characterized the evolution of economies from a Malthusian epoch to a state of sustained economic growth.

Most economic historians view the Industrial Revolution as a gradual process that could not plausibly be viewed as the outcome of a major shock that shifted economies from the basin of attraction of the Malthusian equilibrium into the basin of attraction of the Modern Growth Regime. Hence, the simplest methodology for the generation of a phase transition, namely, a major shock in an environment characterized by multiple locally stable equilibria, appears inappropriate for generating the observed take-off from stagnation to growth.

An alternative methodology for the observed phase transition was rather difficult to establish since a unified growth theory in which economies take off gradually from an epoch of a stable Malthusian stagnation would require a *gradual* escape from an absorbing (stable) equilibrium, which in itself sounds a bit of a contradiction (laughter). Ultimately, however, it has become apparent to me that this phase transition would be captured by a single dynamical system, if the set of steady-state equilibria and their stability would be altered qualitatively in the process of development due to latent state variables that evolve behind the scene and ultimately change the qualitative structure of the dynamical system allowing the economy to escape from the absorbing Malthusian equilibrium and gravitate towards a sustained growth regime. The long era of Malthusian stagnation of output per

capita masked the dynamism behind the scene that ultimately generates a take-off and escape from the Malthusian equilibrium. For example, during the 1-1750 period, world population quadrupled even though income per capita remained rather stable.

When I constructed the model I did it in such a way that it contained a latent state variable that would ultimately bring about the change that we observe. I also needed to assure that during the take-off the positive relationship between population and income per capita would remain for some time, but then the model would generate, endogenously, a demand for human capital and a demographic transition. This is when I began to review the different theories of the demographic transition.

### **The demographic transition**

*With respect to explaining the demographic transition and falling birth rates, researchers have emphasised, for example, falling infant mortality, the rising opportunity cost of women's time,<sup>20</sup> the decline in the pensions motive for having children, and the reduction in family income generated from child labour due to public policies. What is your overall assessment of existing explanations of the demographic transition, and why have you focussed on an explanation that emphasises the demand for human capital?*

A natural starting point was Gary Becker's theory.<sup>21</sup> Becker argues that the rise in the level of income induced a fertility decline because of two related reasons. First, the positive income effect on fertility that was brought about by the rise in income was dominated by the negative substitution effect that was triggered by the increase in the opportunity cost of raising children through forgone earning in labour force participation. Second, the income elasticity with respect to child quality is greater than that with respect to child quantity, and a rise in income therefore led to a decline in fertility along with a rise in the investment in each child.

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<sup>20</sup> Galor and Weil, 1996.

<sup>21</sup> See Becker, 1981.

When I reviewed the historical evidence, however, it became evident that the Beckerian theory appears inconsistent with the evidence. In the context of the relatively homogeneous region of Western Europe, the timing of the demographic transition was not negatively related to the level of income per capita, as the Beckerian theory would imply. The demographic transition occurred simultaneously in a set of countries whose income gap is in a ratio of 3:1 around 1870. For example, the demographic transition occurs in the 1870s in England where income per capita was around \$3200 per year, in Germany where it was \$1800 per year, and also in Finland where income per capita was only \$1100 per year.<sup>22</sup> More generally, based on evidence on the relationship between income and fertility within and across economies it does not appear plausible that the rise in the level of income per capita is the driving force behind the demographic transition.

I next examined the influence of declining infant mortality. The decline in infant and child mortality rates that preceded the decline in fertility rates in many countries in the world was among the factors that affected the level of fertility. Nevertheless, historical evidence does not indicate that the decline in mortality rates accounts for the *reversal* of the positive historical trend between income and fertility. The decline in fertility during the demographic transition in Western Europe occurred in a period in which the pace of mortality decline remained stable for nearly a century and it appears that it was triggered by a universal force that changed its course during this period.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, it became apparent that the dominating universal force that triggered the decline in fertility was the acceleration in the rates of technological progress in the post-Malthusian regime and its inevitable effect on the rise in the demand for human capital.<sup>24</sup> The increase in the rate of technological progress brought about an increase in the industrial demand for human capital in the second phase of industrialization which, along the lines of the Beckerian theory, induced a substitution by parents of quantity of children for quality of children and the onset the demographic transition.

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<sup>22</sup> See Maddison, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> See also, Doepke, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> See Galor 2005b.

## Trade and the demographic transition

*You have an interesting paper, co-authored with Andrew Mountford, that links the patterns of specialisation and trade with the emergence of the 'Great Divergence' and the failure of the demographic transition to spread to countries like India until late in the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Specialisation helped to raise living standards in Britain, whereas it led to population growth in India. Can you explain the thinking behind this argument?*

The argument of that paper is that if trade opens up between advanced and less advanced economies, say Britain and India, at a time when Britain is more technologically advanced than India, then specialisation will imply that Britain produces industrial skill-intensive goods, whereas India will specialise in the production of primary goods which are much less skill intensive. The demand for human capital in Britain will increase leading to an earlier demographic transition. In India we should expect the demand for human capital to decline leading to a delay in the demographic transition. This would prolong the post-Malthusian regime in India and shorten it in Britain. It is important to note that while both Britain and India gain from trade, the composition of their gains is different. Much of the gain to India is in the form of population growth with a smaller part coming in the form of rising income per capita. In Britain most of the gains come in the form of rising income per capita.

*Where does this leave David Ricardo's famous theory of comparative advantage which is popularly invoked by economists to demonstrate the mutual gains from specialisation and trade in terms of its impact on living standards?<sup>26</sup> Is the different outcome from your theory due to dynamic effects dominating static effects from specialisation and trade?*

Ricardo's influential theory of comparative advantage suggests that if trade patterns follow the patterns of comparative advantage, trade is mutually beneficial and each

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<sup>25</sup> Galor and Mountford, 2004, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Ricardo, 1817. See also, Irwin, 1996.



of the trading parties will generate a gain in aggregate income. However the Ricardian theory does not consider the possibility that population may be affected by the patterns of specialisation. Once you permit population to be endogenous we ought to reinterpret the famous argument about gains from trade. The gains from trade are in the context of *total* output. Even if the terms of trade effect equalises the gains from trade in terms of total output for the two trading economies, this does not imply that there will be similar gains in output per capita. Total output is the product of output per capita and population and there are two dimensions in which total output can be enlarged: population and output per capita. In the case of India the gains were relatively larger in the population dimension, whereas in the case of Britain it was mainly in the output per capita dimension.

*Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James Robinson argue that the expansion of Atlantic trade had beneficial effects on the British economy because it lead to a change in the political power structure in favour of an emerging entrepreneurial class.<sup>27</sup> This story complements their emphasis on the importance of institutions as the key determinant of economic success.<sup>28</sup> Does their trade story complement yours?*

My research has focused on the identification of the underlining economic forces that brought about the transition from stagnation to growth and the divergence in economic performance across countries. In particular, I have attributed the transition to a state of sustained economic growth to the rise in the demand for human capital and a decline in population growth. Their research, in contrast, abstracts from the transition from stagnation to growth and attributes contemporary differences in income per capita to the role of institutions. I view the indirect political economy mechanism complementary to my attempt to identify the direct economic forces that were generated by international trade and their consequences.

Perhaps this would be a good point for me to comment more broadly about my view of the role of institutions in the process of development, particularly in the light of unified growth theory. As I explained earlier, the Malthusian epoch is governed by

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<sup>27</sup> Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, 2005a.

<sup>28</sup> Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, 2005b.

economic forces that will inevitably generate industrialisation and a transition to sustained economic growth. The rapidity of this process may be influenced by different factors including institutions. But institutions, by themselves, do not trigger a take-off from stagnation to sustained economic growth. They simply affect the speed of this transition. Institutions can be viewed as the oil that lubricates the wheels of a train that is already in motion. The presence or absence of oil may affect the speed of the train, but it does not trigger its initial motion.

## **Das Human-Kapital**

*In your 'Das Human-Kapital' paper, co-authored with Omer Moav, you argue that capitalists consciously brought about a transformation of society because of their positive attitude towards the promotion of mass education.<sup>29</sup> As technological progress accelerated, the complementarity of physical capital and human capital in the production process generated incentives for capitalists to support investment in human capital. Contrary to conventional Marxist thinking, capitalists, by actively supporting educational reforms, ultimately undermined the class structure. Claudia Goldin has also emphasised the importance of human capital in establishing US economic supremacy during the twenty first century.<sup>30</sup> As Goldin's paper shows, Europe lagged well behind the US in the promotion of mass education.<sup>31</sup> Since both European countries and the US were capitalist economic systems do you have any thoughts on why Europe lagged behind?*

Variations in the provision of public education over this period among equally developed economies could be partly attributed to non-economic objectives such as social and national cohesion, military efficiency, enlightenment, moral conformity, sociopolitical stability as well as religious reasons. But perhaps the earlier onset of mass education in the US could be linked to the adverse effect of income inequality and the concentration of land ownership on human capital formation.<sup>32</sup> As the industrial demand for human capital emerged, differential human capital formation

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<sup>29</sup> Galor and Moav, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Goldin, 2001.

<sup>31</sup> See also the interview with Claudia Goldin in Snowden, 2008b.

<sup>32</sup> Galor and Zeira, 1993; Galor, Moav, and Vollrath, 2006.

occurred across countries. Even though individuals with credit constraints could not finance this growth promoting human capital formation, a conflict of interests between capitalists and the landed aristocracy affected the implementation of institutions that promote human capital formation, such as public education.

*So prior to industrialisation, the main conflict of interest in society was between the elite, largely the landed aristocracy, and labour.*

Indeed. Prior to industrialisation, the main conflict of interest in society was between the landed aristocracy and labour. The production process that occurred at this time implied that a larger output share to workers would result in a smaller share to the landed aristocracy. Industrialisation, however, shifted the conflict of interest in society from a conflict between the elite and the masses to a conflict between the landed aristocracy and the emerging capitalist elite. The capitalist elite tended to support education reforms so as to complement their capital in the production process. The landed aristocracy, on the other hand, objected to public education because human capital was more complementary to the industrial production process than the agricultural one. They feared that educated workers would depart from the agricultural sector and would bring about a decline in the rental rate. In places where land inequality was more pronounced and the landed aristocracy was therefore more powerful, one should expect to observe less human capital formation. In this respect the more egalitarian nature of the US society in that period may have led to the earlier promotion of mass education.

*Since you mention inequality, it is worth recalling that some economists have argued that inequality can promote economic growth. For example, fifty years ago, Nicholas Kaldor, developed a model of economic growth where inequality is good for growth because it concentrated income in the hands of the capitalist investing class.<sup>33</sup> What is your view on the relationship between inequality and growth?*

I think that the replacement of physical capital accumulation by human capital accumulation as the main engine of economic growth changed the effect of

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<sup>33</sup> Kaldor, 1957.

inequality on the process of development.<sup>34</sup> In the early stages of industrialisation, when physical capital accumulation was the prime engine of economic growth, inequality enhanced the process of development. It diverted resources towards capitalists whose marginal propensity to save is higher and it increased the rate of investment and capital accumulation. However, in the later stages of the transition to modern growth, once human capital emerged as the prime engine of economic growth, equality alleviated the adverse effect of credit constraints on human capital formation and stimulated the growth process. Finally, it appears plausible that at more advanced stages of economic development the impact of inequality on growth becomes more ambiguous. Credit constraints become less binding and their effect on efficient investment in human capital and investment projects is less pronounced, while the economic incentives that are generated by inequality remain in place.

*During the last twenty years or so, Robert Fogel has emphasised the importance for economic growth of what he calls the ‘technophysical evolution’ of the human population.<sup>35</sup> Until very recently in human history the vast majority of people were physically incapable of sustaining productive work for extended periods because of poor diet, health and general physical strength and stature. Does this neglected aspect of growth analysis play any part of your unified growth story?*

Certainly. When I refer to human capital in my unified theory of growth, I am interpreting human capital very broadly to include education and health. The rise in the demand for human capital and the emergence of human capital formation over the period of industrialisation can be viewed in the context of education as well as human health that allowed labour to be much more productive.

### **The modern growth regime**

*In the modern growth regime we have growth driven by technological progress and the demographic transition is more or less completed. Since technological progress*

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<sup>34</sup> See Galor and Moav, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Fogel 1994, 1999, 2004.

*depends on new ideas, this is where your story must connect with Paul Romer's work on endogenous technological change.*<sup>36</sup>

Romer's research as well as the work of Philippe Aghion and Peter Howitt, and Gene Grossman and Elhanan Helpman is instrumental for the understanding of the role of ideas in promoting technological progress and sustaining economic growth.<sup>37</sup> Unified growth theory employs a similar underlying structure that generates technological progress and sustained economic growth.

*In William Baumol's recent work he has stressed the importance of innovation and of the crucial role of entrepreneurship in fostering and sustaining economic growth.*<sup>38</sup>  
*Where does the entrepreneur fit in with your explanation of long-run growth?*

In unified growth theory technological progress in the modern growth regime is governed by human capital formation. This flexible theoretical black box can be adjusted to the growth experience of individual countries, by incorporating the elements that are unique to these economies. In particular, the effect of human capital on technological progress will be stronger in a society in which intellectual property rights that are optimally protected and the class of entrepreneurs is significant.<sup>39</sup>

*One worrying feature of the modern growth regime that has emerged in recent years is the problem of demographic ageing. In a sense we now have the reverse of Malthus in that in many countries a major concern is that the fertility rate has fallen below the replacement rate. In many developed countries population is forecast to fall, in some cases like Japan, quite dramatically.*<sup>40</sup> *This problem is also affecting countries of the former Soviet Union and China. Can this phenomenon fit into your long-run story of growth?*

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<sup>36</sup> Romer, 1990.

<sup>37</sup> Grossman and Helpman, 1994; Aghion and Howitt, 1998.

<sup>38</sup> See Baumol, 2002; Baumol, Litan and Schramm, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> See Galor and Michalopoulos, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> See, United Nations, 2007.

Unified growth theory can generate a long-run equilibrium with declining, stable, or rising population growth. You should note, however, that a declining population growth will induce a substitution of quality for quantity of children and the decline in fertility therefore will be associated with an increase in investment in human capital for each individual. As a result, the productive capacity of individuals will rise from generation to generation and may permit the support of the proportionately larger ageing population.

*Another issue that is currently a central focus of discussion relates to the relationship between growth and the environment and the problem of global warming. In Britain last year we saw the publication of the Stern Report which caused a huge, and ongoing, public debate on this issue.<sup>41</sup> If every country in the world eventually joins the modern growth regime, can the world as a whole sustain growth on such a global scale into the distant future, or will we have to completely rethink the way we live? Are you confident that technology can solve the problems caused by global warming, assuming that it is caused by human activity?*

Indeed, if population growth in the world will keep on growing, as it did during the twentieth century, then we will face a major demographic catastrophe. However, I am not concerned about this possibility. I think before we will reach a catastrophe, resource constraints will raise the cost of raising children sufficiently so as to assure that population growth will come to a halt. Similarly, if technological progress will not permit us to control global warming, its adverse effects will generate an economic slowdown to a rate of economic growth that can be sustained by the environment.

*Economic growth comes in for a lot of criticism for the costs it imposes on society, particularly from environmentalists. Ben Friedman's recent book, The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth, provides a spirited defence of economic growth in terms of the many beneficial, and often neglected, effects that growth has on society.<sup>42</sup> Friedman argues that when economic growth increases material living standards, for a majority of the population, it also tends to promote social and*

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<sup>41</sup> Stern, 2006a, 2006b; Stern *et al*, 2007; Carter *et al*, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Friedman, 2005. See also the interview with Ben Friedman in Snowdon, 2008b.

*political progress. Do you share Friedman's vision on this aspect of economic growth?*

I entirely share this viewpoint. I think that economic growth alleviates poverty, increases social mobility, generates the income that allows people to fulfil their potential, and promotes freedom.

### **Culture, religion and economic growth**

*There has been a recent revival of interest in the influence of culture and religion and on the economic performance of nations.<sup>43</sup> I note that in a recent paper you have also entered this debate.<sup>44</sup> What are the basic ideas in that paper and how does it relate to unified growth theory?*

This research argues that variations in the interplay between cultural assimilation and cultural diffusion have played a significant role in giving rise to differential patterns of economic development across the globe. At the start of the 2nd millennium CE, civilisations of Asia were arguably well ahead of European societies in both wealth and knowledge. By the 12th century, China employed water-driven machinery to make textiles and coke-based smelting to produce iron. These technologies, however, would not appear in Europe for more than five hundred years. Yet, during the process of the Industrial Revolution, the technological leaders of the pre-industrial era were leapfrogged by European economies that accelerated into the modern age of sustained economic growth. What can explain the delayed emergence of sustained growth in China and other leading agricultural societies?

In contrast to the cultural and institutional hypotheses, which posit a hierarchy of cultural and institutional attributes in terms of their conduciveness to innovation and their ability in fostering industrialisation, the theory suggests that the desirable degree of the relative prevalence of cultural assimilation versus cultural diffusion varies according to the stage of development. Enhanced cultural assimilation is

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<sup>43</sup> See Porter, 2000; Guiso *et al*, 2003, 2006; Barro and McCleary, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Ashraf and Galor, 2007a.

optimal within a given stage of development, but is detrimental for the transition between technological regimes. Hence, while cultural traits themselves do not necessarily have a differential effect on the process of development, it is the variation in the relative strengths of the forces of cultural assimilation and cultural diffusion, determining the diversity of these traits, which is instrumental for comparative economic development.

It is argued that productivity is enhanced by diversity-driven accumulation of general human capital but reduced by inefficiencies in the intergenerational transmission of society-specific human capital that is associated with diminished assimilation. Thus, societies that were geographically less vulnerable to cultural diffusion benefited from enhanced assimilation, lower cultural diversity and greater accumulation of society-specific human capital, flourishing in the technological paradigm that characterised the agricultural stage of development. This greater cultural rigidity, however, diminished the ability of these societies to adapt to a new technological paradigm, delaying their industrialisation and take-off to a state of sustained economic growth.

### **Geography v institutions**

*Another important debate in the growth literature has been that between those who stress the importance of institutions in the growth process, such as Douglass North, Daron Acemoglu, Bill Easterly, and Dani Rodrik, and those who believe that economists have on the whole neglected the importance of geographical factors, such as David Landes, Jared Diamond, and Jeffrey Sachs.<sup>45</sup> You have already mentioned the influence of geography with respect to its impact on cultural diffusion, but what are your general thoughts on the importance of geography with respect to its influence on the prosperity of nations? Have economists perhaps neglected the importance of geography?*

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<sup>45</sup> Bloom and Sachs, 1998; Diamond, 1998; Landes, 1998; Rodrik, 2003, 2007; Sachs, 2003; Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, 2005b; Easterly and Levine, 2003; Easterly, Ritzen, and Woolcock, 2006. See also the interviews with Acemoglu, Easterly, Rodrik and Sachs in Snowden, 2007a.



I would enlarge the context of this debate and frame it in the context of the comparative role of geography, human capital, and institutions in the process of development. Clearly, variations in geographical factors preceded those in human capital and institutions. Geographical factors affected the genetic make up of the population, human capital formation, and presumably the evolution of institutions over time.

The influential thesis of Jarred Diamond suggests that contemporary variations in economic development could be traced to bio-geographical factors that led to regional variations in the timing of the Neolithic Revolution. He argues that the Neolithic Revolution conferred a developmental head-start to societies that experienced an earlier transition from primitive hunting and gathering techniques to the more technologically advanced agricultural mode of production. According to this hypothesis, the favorable bio-geographic endowments that contributed to the emergence of agriculture gave some societies the early advantage of operating a superior production technology and generating resource surpluses, which enabled the establishment of a non-food-producing class whose members were crucial for the development of written language and science, and for the formation of cities, technology-based military powers and nation states. The early dominance of these societies subsequently persisted throughout history, being further sustained by geopolitical and historical processes such as colonization.

While geographical conditions may have a direct effect on the performance of societies today via the disease environment and the feasibility of extensive trade, it appears to me plausible that geographical factors had primarily an indirect effect through human capital formation and institutions. As I emphasized earlier, my viewpoint is that the role of human capital dominates the role of institutions in the process of development. While the formation of human capital was a critical force in triggering the transition from stagnation to growth, institutions affected only the pace of this transition.

### **Prospects for global convergence**

*During the last two hundred years we have witnessed global divergence.<sup>46</sup> There are many views about the current path of world inequality held by economist such as Xavier Sala-i-Martin, Branco Milanovic, and Francois Bourguignon.<sup>47</sup> Do you think the world will witness global convergence in the twenty-first century?<sup>48</sup>*

I think that the twenty-first century will witness convergence between middle income countries and rich economies, but the gap between these economies and the very poor ones is unlikely to be narrowed. Unfortunately, there is no hierarchy of institutions. Their effectiveness is state dependent. We cannot just drop on poor economies institutions that are suitable for the most developed ones and expect dramatic changes to occur. If we share the hypothesis advanced by unified growth theory that human capital formation is a key factor in the transition from stagnation to growth, it would still be difficult to orchestrate a sustained simultaneous move whereby both the demand and supply of human capital will be present leading to a virtuous circle of development and technological progress. The process of development is a gradual one and convergence is particularly difficult for less developed economies in an interdependent world.

*Earlier this year I interviewed Francois Bourguignon, Chief Economist at the World Bank. In response to one of my questions he said... 'When I first arrived at the World Bank from academia I believed that the problem of development was primarily an economic one requiring economic policy solutions. More and more, with experience, I am becoming convinced that the problem of development is political, and many of the political problems in developing countries are rooted in the issue of inequality'.<sup>49</sup> It follows that even if economists know what policies are conducive to growth, there are powerful political barriers to the adoption of these growth-enhancing policies.<sup>50</sup> Would you agree with this assessment?*

Political factors are undoubtedly very important and should be considered in the design of economic policy for less developed economies. However, unless we

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<sup>46</sup> See Pritchett, 1997; Maddison, 2001.

<sup>47</sup> Bourguignon and Morrisson, 2002; Milanovic, 2006; Sala-i-Martin, 2006. See also Balcerowicz and Fischer (2006) and the interview with Xavier Sala-i-Martin in Snowden, 2007a.

<sup>48</sup> Galor, 1996.

<sup>49</sup> Snowden, 2008c.

<sup>50</sup> See Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006.

understand the economic forces that would enable less developed economies to follow the path of the developed world towards sustained economic growth, one cannot design the proper policy that will circumvent these political barriers.

### **The 'Industrial Revolution' v 'Neolithic Revolution'**

*Do you think that the Industrial Revolution represents the most important event in human history?*

I would argue that the 'Neolithic Revolution' was at least as important for contemporary economic outcomes. As I discussed earlier, Jared Diamond convincingly argues that variations in the timing of the Neolithic Revolution has a significant effect on comparative development. Moreover, my recent research about human evolution and economic development and the biological origins of the Industrial Revolution suggests that the Neolithic Revolution is a point in human history that has had a long-lasting effect on the composition of the human population and therefore on contemporary stages of development. The Agricultural Revolution and the establishment of individual, rather than tribal, property rights expedited the process of natural selection and increased the representation in the population of individuals, whose characteristics were complementary to the growth process. This evolutionary process accelerated the transition from stagnation to sustained economic growth.

Interestingly, I am in the midst of empirical research about the effect of the Neolithic Revolution on life expectancy today.<sup>51</sup> In the past few years I have been advancing a theory about the evolution of life expectancy. I argue that the rise in population density, the domestication of animals, and the increase in work effort in the course of the Neolithic Revolution increased the exposure and the vulnerability of humans to environmental hazards, such as infectious diseases. This rise in the mortality risk generated an evolutionary advantage to individuals who were genetically pre-disposed towards higher somatic investment. It increased their representation in the

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<sup>51</sup> Galor and Moav, 2005. See also, Comin, Easterly and Gong, 2006.

population, and led to the observed increase in life expectancy in the post-Neolithic period.

More recently I started to examine this theory empirically. I find that a significant portion of contemporary variations in life expectancy across countries can be traced to the time elapsed since the ancestors of the population of each country today experienced the Neolithic Revolution. In particular, regressing current life expectancy on the timing of the Neolithic Revolution, ten thousand years ago in some places, one thousand years ago in other places, while accounting for income, education, health expenditure per person, and geographical characteristics, every one thousand years of earlier transition to the Neolithic period contributes about 1.5 years to life expectancy today. These results implies that, for instance, the European population that experienced the Neolithic Revolution on average 3160 years earlier than the African population would be expected to live 5 years longer, even if the gap in the socioeconomic conditions between these continents will be eliminated. Similarly, Americans from European decent would be expected to live five years longer than Americans from African decent with similar socioeconomic background.

These findings as well as those that support the Diamond hypothesis implies that the Neolithic Revolution was indeed a very important event in human history and probably affected the composition of human populations and human capital formation in a very dramatic way. Ultimately this fed back into the process of industrialisation and the transition into sustained economic growth.

## **Current research**

*In addition to the research you have just outlined, what else are you currently working on?*

I am engaged in a major research project, a very exciting one, with my exceptional doctoral student, Quamrul Ashraf.<sup>52</sup> This research attempts to identify long-run historical forces that have influenced current development. It examines the role of

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<sup>52</sup> Ashraf and Galor, 2007b.

human genetic diversity within a society as an important determinant of its economic development. Contrary to the uni-causal hypothesis of Diamond, this research establishes that, while the timing of the transition to agriculture is indeed an important determinant of economic development, the composition of human populations with respect to their overall genetic diversity has been an equally significant factor in this regard.

In the first stage of this research, the study examines the hypothesized effect of human genetic diversity within societies on their population densities in the years 1 CE, 1000 CE and 1500 CE.

#### *Why is population density so important?*

The examination of comparative economic development in the pre-colonial era, when societies were in their agricultural stage of development, requires the interpretation of outcomes from a Malthusian steady-state point of view. This implies that the relevant outcome variable for comparative development is population density as opposed to income per capita since, given the natural productivity of land with respect to agriculture, any surplus generated by total factor productivity is channeled into population growth while income per capita remains stable in the long-run.

The empirical analysis shows that human genetic variables and the timing of the Neolithic Revolution each explain slightly over twenty per cent of the variation in population density. The empirical analysis therefore confirms the importance of the Neolithic Revolution for comparative development, but Diamond's conjecture that genetic variables do not play a role in comparative development is rejected.

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