

[Explaining the Industrial Revolution \(again\)](#) [1]

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Greg Clark's recent book, [Farewell to Alms](#) [3], makes the argument that the Industrial Revolution happened because the bourgeois values necessary for it to do so were bred into the English population. It's an appealing argument to both Little Englanders and Great Britons, that there's something special about us: and indeed it's also true that since the IR did indeed start here there was indeed something different about our forefathers.

However, the perceived weakness in the argument has been over the transmission mechanism of those virtues. Was it genetic? or cultural, memetic even? New research seems to show that it might have been a [bit of both](#) [4].

We find that parents who are more trusting and parents who are risk tolerant have children with similar attitudes. The correlation is strong with both mothers and fathers for risk; for trust, the mother plays a more important role than the father. Parents also tend to marry individuals with similar trust and risk attitudes. This reinforces the impact on the child; having one parent with a given attitude means that the child is likely to have a second parent with that attitude as well. We also find a role for environment, because child attitudes are similar to the prevailing attitudes in the local geographic region, even controlling for parental attitudes. Whether attitude transmission works through nurture, nature, or both is not clear, although several pieces of evidence suggest that nurture must play some role.

Trust and risk tolerance are of course cultural pre-requisites for any form of large scale trading economy. Whether it's directly genetic or more to do with nurture and education doesn't really matter for the purposes of Clark's argument. All that's necessary is that such attitudes were passed on by the part of society which was outbreeding the others, as his work on the bourgeois shows they were.

Another result of this research is that there are national differences in these levels of trust and risk tolerance, something which might aid in explaining why there are such differences in economic structure, the prevalence of entrepreneurialism and the rate of growth between nations.

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[5] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript

[6] <http://disqus.com>