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Power and Plenty I [1]

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One of the perks of this wonk land stuff is being sent books before their publication date so that we terribly important people can tell you what to think about them before you read them. As with the upcoming "Power and Plenty [3]" which bills itself as an economic history of the past thousand years. I found it fascinating and it'll provide me with all sorts of wondrous arguments to deploy in times to come, some of which I'll sketch out in the next few days here (no, don't worry, I'm not going to try a comprehensive review of such a complex book in a blog post).

One of the things I like about it is the way that little factoids pop up which explain, make clear in a simple manner, quite complex situations. At one point we're told that the Mongols commanded the services of 50% of the world's horses. At a time when the animal was both the transport to the battlefield and the tank equivalent once there this rather explains some of their success, doesn't it? Another is

> ...the number of operative hours to process 100 lb of cotton was over 50,000 for spinning by hand in India. In England it was cut to only 2,000 by the 1779 invention of Crompton's mule, and fell to 300 by 1795 and 135 by 1825, compared with 40 in 1972....

That after two centuries only 0.1% or less of the man hours are required to do the same thing as before rather explains why our cupboards are filled with a multiplicity of clothes while our forefathers had, if they were lucky, two outfits, daily and Sunday best.

The excellent point is also made that such technological advance really rather required international trade: without it, the domestic market would quickly have become flooded and the economies of scale would never have appeared.

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