



In what articles and books does Professor Alan Macfarlane of Cambridge discuss the predation trap?

Professor Alan Macfarlane uses the “predation trap” (sometimes “predation-on-affluence trap” or “law of increasing predation”) mainly in his work on agrarian civilizations, political economy, and the origins of the modern world. ^[1] ^[2]

Major books where it appears

- **The Riddle of the Modern World: Liberty, Property and Equality** (Palgrave, 2000)
Macfarlane’s “central trap” for agrarian civilizations is that rising productive surplus systematically attracts both external and internal predation, blocking sustained growth. ^[1]
The conclusion of this book is explicitly reused and expanded in his article on David Hume, where he sets out the predation trap and contrasts it with the modern “victory of production over predation”. ^[2] ^[1]
- **The Savage Wars of Peace: England, Japan and the Malthusian Trap** (Palgrave, 2003)
Although framed around the “Malthusian trap,” this book pairs Malthusian pressures with what he elsewhere calls the “law of increasing predation,” explaining how predatory elites in agrarian systems normally cancel out productive advances. ^[3] ^[1]
The mechanism by which England and Japan escape the Malthusian trap is explicitly tied to constraints on internal predation (lords, kings, clerical hierarchies, guilds) and the partial neutralization of the predation trap. ^[4] ^[1]

Articles and essays

- **“David Hume and the Political Economy of Agrarian Civilization” (2002)**
Available as a PDF on his Cambridge site, this essay opens with a general model of agrarian civilizations in which “predatory tendencies” (warfare, raiding, taxation, rents, absolutist religion and government) systematically crush productive growth. ^[1]
He describes this as the **central trap** of agrarian civilization: as productive technology yields greater surpluses, these “almost automatically increased predation by increasing temptations,” leading back to stagnation or decline. ^[1]
- **“From the Malthusian Trap to the World We Live In” (c. 2002, PDF S4.pdf)**
In this short synthesis, Macfarlane explicitly contrasts the powers of production and the powers of predation, asking how wealth creation could ever continue when predation is normally stronger and more tempting. ^[4]
The piece summarizes the predation trap as the normal condition of agrarian worlds and

then sketches the historical conditions under which production finally “wins” over predation in the modern West. ^[2] ^[4]

- **“Tendencies 1” / “Predation-on-affluence trap” (PDF MARTIN3.pdf)**

This short internal paper or lecture note explicitly labels one mechanism the **“predation-on-affluence trap,”** defined as the tendency for periods of material prosperity to induce withdrawal from innovation and manufacture as elites and others divert effort into exploiting existing affluence. ^[5]

Here he tightens the concept by focusing on how rising wealth not only attracts predatory elites but also shifts the wider population away from productive risk-taking toward rent-seeking and consumption. ^[5]

- **“Yukichi Fukuzawa and the Making of the Modern World” (essay / lecture)**

In this PDF he again stresses that as productive technologies grew more powerful, they were “more than counterbalanced by predatory tendencies,” both external and internal, which halted growth in most civilizations. ^[6]

The essay uses Fukuzawa and Japan to explore how institutional and cultural reforms can partially disable this predation trap and allow a sustained shift toward production. ^[6]

- **“F.W. Maitland and the Making of the Modern World” (article)**

In this biographical-intellectual essay, Macfarlane situates Maitland’s legal history within a larger story of how English institutional development constrained “predation on merchants and producers,” thereby easing the usual agrarian trap. ^[7]

While the exact phrase “predation trap” may not appear, the same predation-vs-production framework underlies the argument. ^[7] ^[1]

- **“The Invention of the Modern World” series (Fortnightly Review, esp. Part 3, 2012)**

In this serialized version of his larger project, he describes “the subtlest form of predation” afflicting Holland as it moved toward banking and mercantile wealth, again emphasizing how growth in wealth tends to invite predatory extraction by political and social elites. ^[8]

This series effectively popularizes the predation-trap logic he develops more formally in Riddle of the Modern World and related essays. ^[8] ^[1]

Audio/video where the theme appears

- **“Explorations: Animal Farm: Long Term History: Australia – The contradictory character of human beings: predation and co-operation” (Cambridge video, 2018)**

In this lecture Macfarlane contrasts human capacities for predation and cooperation, embedding the historical predation-trap story in a broader anthropological account of human nature and long-term history. ^[9]

While framed less explicitly as a “trap,” the same idea—that increasing wealth and power amplify predatory possibilities and threaten productive advance—structures the discussion. ^[9] ^[1]

How to locate specific discussions

- For the **most explicit** terminology (“predation-on-affluence trap” and closely related formulations), the key texts are:
 - The conclusion of **The Riddle of the Modern World** (reproduced in the Hume article).^[1]
 - The short piece “From the Malthusian Trap to the World We Live In (S4.pdf).”^[4]
 - The “Tendencies 1” / MARTIN3.pdf note.^[5]
- For **broader development** of the concept, including without the exact phrase “predation trap,” the main venues are:
 - **The Savage Wars of Peace**, particularly where he pairs Malthusian constraints with increasing predation.^{[3] [1]}
 - The essays on Fukuzawa and Maitland and the “Invention of the Modern World” series.^{[6] [8] [7]}

If you want, a next step would be to map the evolution of his formulation over time (from early Gellner-influenced “law of increasing predation” language through to the more specific “predation-on-affluence trap” in the MARTIN3 note).

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1. <https://www.alanmacfarlane.com/TEXTS/HUME.pdf>
2. <https://www.3-16am.co.uk/articles/ernest-gellner-some-reflexions-twenty-six-years-on-from-his-death>
3. <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Savage+Wars+of+Peace:+England,+Japan+and+the+Malthusian+Trap-a0125151382>
4. <https://www.alanmacfarlane.com/TEXTS/S4.pdf>
5. <https://www.alanmacfarlane.com/TEXTS/MARTIN3.pdf>
6. <https://www.alanmacfarlane.com/TEXTS/start.pdf>
7. https://www.academia.edu/123539979/F_W_Maitland_and_the_Making_of_the_Modern_World
8. <https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2012/05/invention-3/>
9. <https://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/2696459>
10. <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ecs2.4261>
11. <https://studentecologistbristol.home.blog/2021/02/11/bats-and-moth-trapping-responses-of-bats-to-artificial-night-lighting-and-implications-of-moth-trapping-an-informal-study-and-report/>
12. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27041270>
13. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/FantasyFaction/posts/3222064868102685/>
14. <https://academic.oup.com/icesjms/article-pdf/82/9/fsaf162/64306366/fsaf162.pdf>
15. <https://cwc-mi.org/outdoor-books-for-outdoor-people/>
16. <https://www.scielo.br/j/ni/a/M855j8SQwNRL8ykfcHgXTBv/?format=html&lang=en>
17. <https://thehistorianjournal.files.wordpress.com/2020/01/fin-print-edition.pdf>
18. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12120396/>

