

**Notes to
William McNeill,
Plagues and Peoples**

William McNeill's Plagues and Peoples is one of the most fascinating and eccentric works in the world-history canon. You have been asked to read chapters 4-6, but might be interested in chapters 1-3 as well. Here is a quick overview of the first, mostly unassigned, half of the work, including some terms used in the Introduction (pp. 19-32) and elsewhere that underlie the rest of the book.

The book's originality becomes apparent right away, as we review its cast of characters.

“Micro-parasites are tiny organisms -- viruses, bacteria, or multi-celled creatures as the case may be -- that find a source of food in human tissues suitable for sustaining their own vital processes” (24). By my reading, micro-parasites are the “heroes” of the story McNeill sets out to tell. True enough, they weaken and sometimes kill the “host” organisms they feed off of. But McNeill sees them as an inevitable participant in the “web of life” and admires the way they adapt over time, learning how to defend themselves against the immune systems hosts devise (when exterminated by those systems, their descendants always find a way to bounce back) and also how to suck off just enough sustenance to sustain themselves without killing the host, an extreme outcome that has the consequence of killing them as well. Tracing their evolution over time and space, McNeill might be seen as the Darwin of micro-parasites.

Macro-parasites are large-bodied organisms, such as lions, wolves, and human beings. Like the micro-parasites, they prey on other creatures and over the course of their evolution had to learn to get what they needed in order to live while at the same time not destroying the creatures that served them for nourishment.

Human beings are, according to McNeill, by far the most gifted and ruthless and profligate of the macro-parasites and therefore are far more likely than other parasites, micro- or macro-, to upset natural balances among the earth's plants and creatures. This radical demotion of humanity from the moral pinnacle we normally assign to it is among the most startling and thought-provoking of McNeill's contributions. This way of sizing up human evolution leads him to affirm that, from the point of view of other parasites, “humankind therefore resembles an acute epidemic disease” (41).

The **intermediaries**. These are the creatures that transmit micro-parasites from one host to another. Having come to terms with the parasites they carry, they are able to serve as carriers without themselves suffering any major debility. Examples include: malaria, carried by mosquitoes; bubonic plague, carried by rodents and their fleas; schistosomiasis, carried by snails; sleeping sickness, carried by tsetse flies; and typhus, carried by fleas and lice (see pages 29 and following). Just as he does with micro-parasites, McNeill aspires to uncover the hidden history of the intermediaries. See, for

example, the passage on underground “cities,” built by rats and other burrowing creatures (page 139).

Note that, by contrast, diseases such as tuberculosis, measles, smallpox, chicken pox, whooping cough, mumps, and influenza, “pass directly from host to host with no intermediary carrier and with minimal delay” (pages 31).

Intra-species parasites. McNeill sees conquerors and landlords and “priests and kings and their urban hangers-on,” as parasites, who prey on “hard-pressed peasantries” (page 25), just as viruses and bacteria batten on human beings and other large-bodied creatures.

Preface. This book was published in 1977, and the paperback that you have in hand appeared in 1998. The “preface,” written for the 1998 edition, would have been better described as an “epilogue,” since it was written 20 years after the original text. It provides an opportunity for McNeill to comment on the AIDs phenomenon, which did not erupt into view until the 1980s. It is useful in clarifying McNeill’s politics.

Introduction. In this chapter, McNeill explains how micro-parasites can infect and destroy their victims; or the immune defensive systems of the host organism can block and destroy the parasites. But, the author affirms, parasites and the organisms they prey on sooner or later achieve some sort of balance. This vision of peaceful coexistence leads McNeill to a number of surprising conclusions, such as the notion that lethal parasites are, by the very nature of their virulence, self-destructive, since they kill off the host organism that they need in order to survive (page 28). Paradox is carried even further when he turns the argument around and expresses a tacit sympathy for the invading parasite that is devoured by the white corpuscles in the human body, a massacre comparable to what we call an “epidemic” and one that postpones the equilibrium that nature will sooner or later establish between micro-parasites and the organisms they need to feed off of to live (page 25).

Chapter 1, Man the Hunter. This chapter provides a quick overview of pre-history, beginning in the African rain forest. The acquisition of language and the use of tools set human beings apart from other macro-parasites and vastly increased human potential for disrupting the pre-existing balance in “the entire life system of which humanity was a part” (page 35). By learning how to clothe and house itself, humanity gained the capacity to survive in cooler climates, a development that allowed for vast migrations into what are now the major continents of the globe (page 46). Among the many important consequences of this trend was the extermination of “most large-bodied game in North and South America” (48). Note McNeill’s telling language in this section of the chapter, where he refers to “skilled and wasteful human hunters,” and “humanity’s spendthrift ways” (pages 48-49). The rise of agriculture made possible greater concentrations of people and eventually the formation of the first cities, and this development, in turn, opened possibilities for micro-organisms to launch a counter-attack against human beings, now highly agglomerated and therefore targets for epidemic diseases.

Chapter 2, Breakthrough to History. When McNeill says “New World,” he is talking about the Americas, North and South. “Old World” is a reference to Eurasia, Europe and Asia, the landmass from the British Isles to Japan.

The chapter shows McNeill repeatedly playing on the give-and-take between disease and human history. The rise of animal husbandry and agriculture constitutes major steps forward. But domesticated animals were more likely to serve as partners to intermediaries such as fleas, who found new opportunities to carry micro-parasites from one human host to another. Clearing forests opened the door to new kinds of mosquitoes and to the spread of malaria (Page 66), and plowing the soil raised food production, while also making available “dense concentrations of food for parasites” (page 59), macro- as well as micro-. In a frightening passage, McNeill pictures the world’s peasantries beset by tiny disease-bearing organisms, which left them weakened and less able to defend themselves against human predators imposing taxes and rents (page 63). But note also that this implicit condemnation is joined to praise for “conquerors,” who “learned how to rob agriculturalists in such a way as to take from them some but not all of their harvest” (page 72).

McNeill’s insistence on the omnipotence of micro-parasites (the macro-parasites are part of the story, but play a secondary role) often leads to a kind of determinism, an over-riding of other sorts of historical explanation. McNeill argues that climate writ large — the tropical rain forest, with its multiple micro-parasites — explains “why Africa remained backward in the development of civilization when compared to temperate lands” (page 67). On the other hand, in a characteristic twist, he then goes on to show how “civilizations,” with their concentrated populations, were themselves prone to disease, and the more “civilized” the were, the greater their vulnerability turned out to be (page 69).

In turn, the argument is then given yet another twist, with the argument that over time sickness confers a kind of power, in the form of immunities, that enable disease-ridden civilizations to overwhelm “healthier” societies (page 73; for more on disease as a weapon, see page 86). As immune systems develop, epidemic give way to endemic diseases, which tend to become “childhood disease” (measles, mumps, small pox, whooping cough), distressing, but usually not fatal. A kind of equilibrium is the result, at least until this urban society encounters another population lacking the necessary exposure and therefore vulnerable to epidemic disaster.

The chapter includes a number of brief case studies on disease and history. McNeill doubts that prohibitions against pork did much for the health of Jewish and Moslem populations (page 64) and thinks that ritual bathing by Moslems and Hindus did not lead, as one might expect, to better hygiene and better health (pages 64-65). See also the passage on rabbits in Australia (page 74), on measles as the best- documented case of infectious disease (page 77), and the extraordinary meditation on disease and the rise of nationalism (page 82).

Chapter 3, Confluence of the Civilized Disease Pools of Eurasia. This chapter shows McNeill, the world historian, at his most dazzling (and also most prone to oversimplification), as he tries, in the space of a few pages, to bring out the essentials of great civilizations as they evolved through the centuries. The general point is to show that the four great civilizations of the first millennium of the Christian era developed relatively distinct “disease pools” (page 123) and how over time increasing contact among these civilizations led to murderous epidemics, until, gradually, there was a “confluence” and a resulting stabilization around the year 1000, which allowed for population increases, at least in Europe and China.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the Middle East and of disease in Biblical times, then quickly turns to China. McNeill is an admirer of the imperial Chinese system, with its enlightened rulers and landlords (pages 99 and following). The movement from north to south China was slowed as northerners encountered a new and dangerous disease pool, but the delay was only temporary, and the expansion of the Empire and attendant rise in population testify, at least to McNeill’s satisfaction, to the vitality of the system.

The author’s view of India is less positive. There, the north-south movement encountered a stiffer resistance from the micro-parasites of the tropical southern regions. The result, according to McNeill, was an enervated and disease-ridden population and a failure to achieve political unification.

Later in the chapter, McNeill discusses Mediterranean civilization in Greece and Rome. As readers of the book so far will not be surprised to learn, he links the rise of Christianity (page 135) and the fall of the Roman Empire to disease. As contacts with other civilizations increased, epidemics broke out (the Dark Ages were “dark” for a reason), but once equilibrium was restored, around 1000, a recovery began. It was the same in China, where small pox, measles, and bubonic plague wrecked havoc, until the population began to recover in the tenth century.