Plagues And Peoples Book Summary, by William H. McNeill
by Allen Cheng


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Full Summary of Plagues And Peoples

Overall Summary

William H. McNeill argues that disease has influenced human history. He says there are two types of history: the study of big events, such as wars and political movements, and the study of how diseases affect people's lives. Until 1976, historians focused on war and politics while ignoring other topics like epidemics or pandemics. However, McNeill changed this by showing that these topics are also important to understand when studying a country's development over time.

The author begins by talking about how humans and parasites have evolved together for a long time. He then talks about the climate in Africa, where most of this evolution took place. The parasite thrived as much as humanity did because it was so hot there. Humans had to depend on the parasites for survival just like the parasites depended on them for survival, which is why they couldn't destroy each other. This balance between humans and their "old friends" has been going on for a very long time until recently when things changed with modern medicine and technology that made us think we didn't need our old friends anymore.

These changes were invisible to early humans, so they didn't include them in their descriptions of themselves. Disease was a matter of health and safety, so it wasn't included either. These balances followed humanity as the Ice Age receded and humankind began spreading out beyond its equatorial confines.

Agriculture helped humans to live together in communities, but it also attracted new pests. As a result, the number of diseases increased as well. Diseases that once wiped out whole communities became endemic (affecting limited groups) over time.

The large-scale technological and infrastructural changes that occurred after the Mongol empire, along with European travel, created better methods of transportation. These new forms of transportation made it easier to spread disease all over the world. The changes also affected cultural norms and traditions as well as early religious texts.

Diseases spread easily across the world, and they can kill people. But now we have ways to fight diseases with microscopes and vaccines. We are also more resilient than before to diseases that have been around
for a long time. However, there will always be new diseases in the future because parasites will find new ways to infect us.

McNeill's book does not center on humans. Instead, it focuses on the importance of various diseases and how they shaped society. Some of these diseases are listed in this section.

Preface

In the preface to his book, McNeill states that many doctors in 1976 believed infectious diseases were no longer a threat. However, he points out that AIDS is an epidemic and endemic disease. He also notes that we are still affected by the web of life.

Introduction

The author of a book on parasites outlines the scope and limitations of his study. He defines parasites as those that can be seen and those that cannot—macroparasites and microparasites.

Chapter 1: “Man the Hunter”

McNeill begins his book in the distant past, when early primates lived. He talks about how they interacted with their environment and humans' place within that food chain.

Tracing the history of disease is difficult. Fossil records found in sub-Saharan Africa don't tell us much about how diseases spread among early humans. McNeill speculates that by observing modern primates, we can learn more about prehistoric disease transmission. He writes that sub-Saharan Africa has a large number of protozoa, fungi and bacteria compared to other regions with colder climates.

The author is not saying that primates in Africa are sick all the time. He says "rain forests support a highly evolved natural balance at every level". It wouldn't make sense for bacteria to kill their hosts, because then they would die too. People moved into drier savannahs so that they could find food and survive. Bacteria adapt to new environments just as people do, but sometimes these changes happen quickly and affect primate bodies in new ways.

In this context, disease occurs when the immune system is unable to adapt to changes in an organism. For instance, a microorganism that causes sleeping sickness does not cause illness when introduced into its original host (the antelope). However, it can cause illness in other organisms because it has not adapted to them. This side effect of the relationship between the microorganism and its original host is only slowly corrected by evolution.

McNeill compares microflora and macroflora, noting that the virulence and rapidity of humankind's spread across the globe in just a few hundred millennia could be likened to a disease. This spread forced hasty ecological rebalancing, which is akin to disease acting as a natural limitation and rebalancing for such rapid growth.

Evidence of modern human physiology was scattered with contradictory archeological signs over the
course of 50,000 to 100,000 years ago. The invention of tools and clothing increased the spread of humanity into colder and drier climates. In contrast, humans discovered that large game became extinct in North and South America after a mere thousand years due to their hunting skills.

McNeill concludes the book by stating that humanity's survival relied on microflora in tropical climates, and large-bodied animals and hunting techniques in colder, drier climates. However, around 20,000 BCE there was a massive climate change which resulted from retreating ice caps.

**Chapter 2: “Breakthrough to History”**

McNeill argues that the last Ice Age retreat led to a massive die-off of large animals, and as a result, humans were forced to find new ways to feed themselves. People started cultivating plants and domesticated many species of animals. There is not much evidence about how this happened but it was probably very fast because there are so many domesticated species today. McNeill says six changes occurred during this time: 1) people increased the number of cultivated plant and animal species; 2) food supplies reduced biological diversity; 3) people needed more protection from human parasitism; 4) they developed regular patterns for working on their land (e.g., sowing seeds); 5) they had to redirect water in order to cultivate land in different areas (e.g., building canals); 6) they created increasingly complex tools used for farming (e.g., ploughs).

McNeill concludes by saying that early civilizations emerged due to these changes in human behavior arising from climate change.

During this period, humans developed farming innovations such as crop rotation and rice paddy farming. Farmers’ concerns were over the infestation of parasites like weeds, weevils, rats and mice. Human civilization was also breeding new forms of disease among people by increasing contact with animals that carry diseases in addition to human waste.

Civilization has grown over the years, despite disease-bearing parasites. In fact, civilization has flourished and grown in size over time. Nevertheless, disease profoundly shaped human society and while humans today are not much different from their ancestors, the same is true of those diseases existing today. By studying how disease affects contemporary society McNeill can hypothesize how it must have affected prehistoric communities.

Schistosomiasis is a disease spread by parasitic flatworms that makes people listless and debilitated. This made it difficult for people to protect themselves from other threats, such as parasites in human society. Therefore, ancient traditions were created to help protect humans against diseases and sicknesses. For example, the Jewish and Muslim cultures prohibited eating pork because of their mistaken belief that this would prevent them from getting sick. Other cultural practices also helped spread disease rather than prevent it due to misunderstandings about how these diseases are transferred between hosts.

The spread of human society and the growth of cities led to an imbalance in disease resistance. People living in rainforests were more used to diseases that would kill people from drier climates, while city dwellers had developed "childhood" diseases that appeared only when there was a large population. These diseases followed resistant city dwellers into less populated areas where they devastated the peasantry.
The close proximity with domesticated animals also caused new forms of disease to appear, such as cowpox, influenza, bubonic plague and measles among others.

It is important to understand how diseases affect people, especially in war times. In this passage, the author uses a digestive metaphor for understanding disease's effect on communities and empires. He says that an empire's health is dependent upon the balance of diseases between civilized and tropical peoples.

**Chapter 3: “Confluence of the Civilized Disease Pools of Eurasia: 500 B.C. to A.D. 1200”**

A more extensive written record allows McNeill to study disease patterns starting from 500 B.C. At that time, civilization flourished along several well-known and fertile river basins, but there were general rules to the limits of their expansion, many of them explained by disease. In the ancient Middle East, literary sources such as the “Epic of Gilgamesh” and the Old Testament reference familiarity with society-altering diseases, although only through modern deduction may it be determined which those diseases were and what their real world context was. The Assyrian and Persian empires flourished well before this period described in this chapter, so they weren't threatened by epidemic diseases like measles or chicken pox because they had no contact with these types of illnesses when they first appeared.

McNeill focuses on three geographical regions: China, the Nile River Valley in Egypt, and Mesopotamia. In China, the climate was hospitable for people to live there. By contrast, in Egypt and Mesopotamia it was not as hospitable because of diseases like malaria. The bureaucratic structures that were developed by Chinese helped them maintain a balance between politics and warfare.

By contrast, the Yangtze river region was less affected by parasites. McNeill believes that diseases like malaria and dengue fever were a major part of this problem. The Ganges region posed different problems because it had an unstable political environment. As opposed to China, India never consolidated its culture into one enduring whole due to its disease-ridden climate.

The Aegean Sea was the catalyst for a different type of caste system. There were land and sea barriers between civilized citizens and producers who worked the land. Trade helped secure these boundaries, as McNeill says:

This led to a series of wars that were fought between the different city-states. The Greeks were among the first people who wrote about medicine. They described diseases such as malaria, mumps, diphtheria and tuberculosis; however they didn't know much about measles or smallpox which caused great problems later on in Roman civilization. Greek society grew and flourished during this time period due to the vast campaigns that took place throughout Greece's history; however there was a backlash from these movements when villages began to be abandoned and countrysides became empty.

People in large cities were more likely to get sick than those in small towns. The spread of disease from city centers was limited by the fact that it didn't travel well on land, but it did travel quickly along busy trade routes. This is because when a new place opened up for trade, people would go there and bring diseases with them.
Yet, the Roman Empire benefited greatly from trade with other parts of the world. Two major plagues are well-recorded in history, but a third one is not as clear. The Antonine plague was spread by merchants all over the empire and took place between 165 and 266 A.D., during which time it killed millions of people. It was described by Galen (a famous doctor) as a disease that caused rashes on the skin and respiratory problems—though his lens prevented him from understanding what kind of disease it actually was.

During this time, Christianity rose as a meaningful alternative to Roman paganism. People were surprised by the devastation of disease and death that came along with it. Christians could find meaning in their lives despite these sudden deaths because they believed in an afterlife. Later on, historians would be able to identify this plague as bubonic which corresponds to rats brought over from foreign military campaigns. This weakened the Empire's infrastructure even more and probably led to its downfall.

**Chapter 4: “The Impact of the Mongol Empire on Shifting Disease Balances, 1200-1500”**

In the years leading up to the spread of the bubonic plague, people traveled more frequently between different cultures and places. This destabilized Eurasian civilization by increasing contact with other areas that had diseases.

Human travel increased along the steppe between Asia and Europe. The Mongol empire, which lasted from 1206 to 1405 AD, was good at traveling using caravans and military routes. This human activity helped spread diseases among mice since humans were moving around so much in those areas.

The bubonic plague was not fully understood until it broke out in Manchuria. The medical teams quickly discovered that the spread of this disease is carried by rats and other rodents, who transfer it to humans through flea bites. It also spreads among human hosts through respiratory droplets; such spread usually burns itself out, as probably happened during the short-lived Roman-era Justinian Plague in the sixth century. By contrast, since the initial outbreak of plague in Europe in 1346, the disease has been constantly recurring into modern times. This constant recurrence required an underlying infrastructure of rats and fleas.

The spread of the plague is a matter of debate. Scholars used to believe that Mongol tribes directly carried it across the steppe, but McNeill disputes this idea and believes it was more deliberate and slower than people think.

The Black Death was a plague that killed an estimated one-third of Europe's population. It started in China and spread westward, killing people along the way. The plague affected England more than other countries, because they had better records about it. As time went on, the plague became less deadly as it changed to become a disease that only infected rats and not humans anymore. People began quarantining themselves from each other; social classes grew further apart from each other due to their differences in opinion regarding how to deal with the problem; and clothing became even more lethal for spreading the disease because cotton is so absorbent.

During the time of the Black Death, other diseases were prevalent. Many people who had leprosy thought they had plague and vice versa. The number of cases of leprosy significantly dropped during that period,
which McNeill attributes to disease competition. After the Black Death subsided, tuberculosis, typhus and syphilis increased in prevalence.

The plague had a lot of political and cultural effects. It led to instability, which caused anti-Semitism to rise. The decline of the use of Latin as a European lingua franca was also due to the plague. Painting took on darker themes during this time period as well. People started moving away from Catholicism because they didn't want to be associated with it anymore after seeing so many people die from the plague. They moved towards Protestantism instead, since it offered more freedom than Catholicism did at that time in history.

Chapter 5: “Transoceanic Exchanges, 1500-1700”

McNeill explains that the crossing of Europeans to the Americas represented a global ecological transformation. However, he warns that it is difficult to prove this because evidence and records of human-scale change must be patched in with a lot of speculation. Archeological records show few fossilized remains showing signs of disease, while written records show little evidence of epidemics or plagues. Americans domesticated fewer animals than Europeans did which made them less vulnerable to diseases carried by those animals. Additionally, there were already large populations living in America before Columbus arrived so population density was high, placing strain on agricultural infrastructure.

While the Europeans' treatment of indigenous peoples in the Americas was cruel, they also brought with them diseases that devastated populations. McNeill estimates that 90% of indigenous people were wiped out within a single generation.

The first disease that Europeans brought overseas was smallpox, which they recorded in 1518. It spread southward from Hispaniola into what is now Mexico and helped the conquest of Tenochtitlan by Cortez. The disease traveled south through Guatemala to the Incan empire within a decade, leaving it open for Pizarro's plundering. Since many religious people believed that God punished them with this devastation, there seemed to be divine intervention in these events.

Measles and smallpox soon spread through Mexico and Peru, as did typhus. Influenza also followed the Europeans to America. Smallpox was brought to Massachusetts by English settlers in the 17th century.

The African slave trade also brought new diseases to the Americas. The mosquito Ades aegypti, which thrives in water casks on ships, spread malaria throughout the Caribbean islands. Europeans had to bring over healthy slaves from Africa to replace dying Amerindians.

In contrast to the violence and neglect that took place in the Americas, Eurasia experienced a different kind of story. Although they were still afflicted by epidemic diseases like war and famine, humans adapted to new problems over time. By 1700, people in Eurasia had become more accustomed to disease outbreaks because of technological advancements and land travel between countries. This led to a steady increase in population despite the appearance of new diseases like syphilis and typhus.

Chapter 6: “The Ecological Impact of Medical Science and Organization Since 1700”
Most of human history, the treatment of disease was left to incomplete medical knowledge handed down from medieval philosophers and doctors. People also learned through observation as well as what they were taught by others. The results were often harmful rather than helpful, but with more people being affected by disease around them, doctors began to use better practices in medicine. Paracelsus (1493-1541) was among the first medical observers who rejected old ways of studying and treating diseases. However, expert medical knowledge didn't reach a large number of people until the 18th century.

The population of China increased greatly after the peaceful and orderly Manchu Dynasty was instituted in 1683. The Chinese were early adopters of inoculation, which led to a large landmass for people to live in. Russia and America followed this trend as well, though not as dramatically due to lack of access to modern medical infrastructure. Ireland also experienced a rapid increase in population because they relied on potato production until the 1840s when famine struck.

In contrast, England's population growth would not be seen for a long time. The English had extensive trade networks and created innovations in farming so that their food supply was more varied and efficient than China's. Cattle stock decreased malaria because the mosquitos who carried it preferred the cattle over humans as hosts. Also, increased protein intake due to cattle allowed people to create antibodies against diseases.

The smallpox vaccine was effective, but it took a long time to be widely adopted in Europe and America. In England, the royal family readily accepted the vaccine, but not until safer methods of vaccination had been achieved by using cowpox. People living in cities were resistant to adopting it because they were used to repeated contact with diseases and didn't see the need for such drastic measures. It was more quickly adopted in rural areas and American colonies where people saw how deadly smallpox could be outside of cities.

Vaccines became more popular in Europe after 1800, but they were still not very common. In Turkey and the Middle East, people had been inoculating against disease for hundreds of years before it became a professional practice. However, by the late 19th century, vaccines had become much more popular in both Europe and other places around the world. This increase in popularity led to an even stronger belief in ideals like science and culture that came from the Enlightenment period.

However, there were other factors that contributed to a decline in human health. Conditions for factory workers were poor and led to illnesses, while the Napoleonic wars continued a trend of soldiers dying from disease. The Irish potato famine killed millions and halted population growth in Ireland. Finally, urbanization led to an increase in older diseases like cholera.

There were many threats to the Europeans during the 1800s. One of them was cholera, which spread rapidly and killed people in horrible ways. The first outbreak occurred in 1817 and began spreading around Europe through soldiers fighting battles in India. It continued to spread throughout Europe after that because of sea routes, so outbreaks became common by the 1830s. People didn't know what caused it or how to stop it for a long time because there was disagreement over whether cholera came from germs or miasma (bad air). Eventually scientists figured out that it was caused by germs using microscopes, but they couldn't do anything about it until then.

Despite the devastating effects of cholera, a social movement towards greater sanitation was able to
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lessen its impacts. Cholera was identified as being spread through contaminated water and political reformers emphasized proper hygiene and cleanliness in their efforts. The military also adopted these principles, which made life much safer for soldiers. This led to an English Central Board of Health in 1848 that helped modernize sewage systems throughout the country. Other countries soon followed suit, improving public health with simple preventative measures such as testing and boiling water. These changes precipitated the modern turn toward urbanization with more people moving from rural areas into cities where they worked at new jobs and changed cultural norms.

Cholera was a disease that affected many people in the 19th century. A vaccine for it was developed, and countries across the world mandated vaccinations. This led to the discovery of other vaccines, such as one for typhus (which by 1896) and diphtheria (which was diminished through pasteurization). Quinine was discovered as an imperfect palliative for the symptoms of malaria, which diseases were effectively controlled by reducing mosquito populations and 20th century vaccines. Military organizations played a role in establishing vaccine and sanitary regimens during this time period. During World War I and especially World War II there were greater understandings of sanitary needs among masses of people. The World Health Organization also emerged during this time period to advance new knowledge in these burgeoning fields.

The last great worldwide disease outbreak was in 1918. Although the world has prepared for such a pandemic, it's still very difficult to deal with because viruses mutate quickly. Vaccines are not enough because they have to constantly be updated and changed.