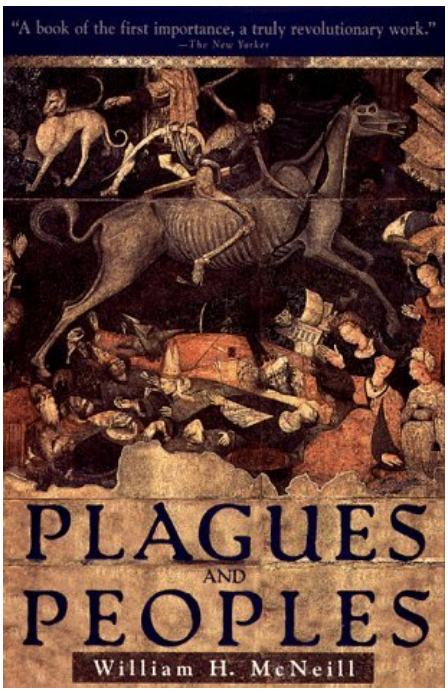

Plagues and Peoples

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Upon its original publication, *Plagues and Peoples* was an immediate critical and popular success, offering a radically new interpretation of world history as seen through the extraordinary impact--political, demographic, ecological, and psychological--of disease on cultures. From the conquest of Mexico by smallpox as much as by the Spanish, to the bubonic plague in China, to the typhoid epidemic in Europe, the history of disease is the history of humankind. With the identification of AIDS in the early 1980s, another chapter has been added to this chronicle of events, which William McNeill explores in his new introduction to this updated editon.

Thought-provoking, well-researched, and compulsively readable, *Plagues and Peoples* is that rare book that is as fascinating as it is scholarly, as intriguing as it is enlightening. "A brilliantly conceptualized and challenging achievement" (Kirkus Reviews), it is essential reading, offering a new perspective on human history.

Plagues and Peoples Details

Date	:	Published October 11th 1977 by Anchor (first published 1976)
ISBN	:	9780385121224
Author	:	William Hardy McNeill
Format	:	Paperback 368 pages
Genre	:	History, Nonfiction, Science, Health, Medicine, Medical, World History

From Reader Review Plagues and Peoples for online ebook

Xan Shadowflutter says

Originally published in the mid 1970s, this may be the first history book to focus on the effects of disease on human civilizations. Beginning with the start of recorded history and continuing into the 20th century, McNeil traces various plagues and their consequences to human populations. Empires have risen and fallen to plagues. McNeil leaves no corner of the globe untouched: Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Australia, and New Zealand are all covered.

It is this book that properly restores the critical role of disease in many major historical events: Plague in Athens during the Peloponnesian War; plague as a major contributing factor in the fall of the Western Roman Empire; plague as cause of the fall of the Mogul Empire; plague as destroyer of native populations in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand. Trade, shipping, armies, pilgrimages all are covered.

McNeil reminds us that it is only in the last century or so that Medical science has truly gotten the better of plague; in fact, it has been so successful in rooting out plague that plague hardly ever enters our thoughts. But that was not always true. For most of recorded history plague and the threat of plague caused great psychological damage to survivors and their civilizations. Plagues are far more efficient killers than wars, accomplishing for combatants what armies never could. The eight page appendix listing plagues in China -- one plague per line entry (dates, locations, deaths), 30 entries per page -- gives you some idea of the scope, effect, and terror that is plague.

Having said that, this is an academic book so reading at times is a slog. Not for everyone, but for those who can endure the slow parts, this is definitely worth the read.

Steve says

An entertaining, if depressing, book on how history has been shaped by disease and pathogens. If you liked Jared Diamond's Guns Germs and Steel, this book is all about the germs, and about more than just the modern era: there are interesting comments on the Black Death and the rise of "childhood diseases" and why the tropics are still to be feared in terms of disease (and why climate change is so worrisome, even though that fear postdates the book by a few decades).

James Castle says

This book, a fresh and wide-ranging look at the links between disease and history, is full of startling and dramatic connections and almost seems designed to provoke. To take one example out of many, McNeill blames the rise of Christianity and the Fall of Rome on plague. He realizes, of course, that the majority of such sweeping generalizations are mere speculation, and indeed he writes at one point that it is only through the dialectic that radical arguments provoke that new historical insight is achieved. I certainly think there is

something to be said for his point.

Nevertheless, the book isn't flawless. Perhaps the main flaw is the constant, overwrought comparison between diseases caused by microorganisms and the strains on society caused by what McNeill refers to as "macroparasitic" entities, by which he means states, tax collectors, armies, etc. I would rather that he had stuck to his thesis rather more closely; his book suffers when its focus wanders into specious comparisons between the very small and the very large.

Nevertheless, the book as a whole is a learned and provoking book, exploring a subject much ignored by historians (and novelists).

"Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist's arm-chair and confuse his "Rinse the mouth—rinse the mouth" with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us—when we think of this, as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature."

- from "On Being Ill," Virginia Woolf

Alex Zakharov says

Written back in ’76 the view expressed in the book is only more pertinent today when we have no dearth of theories explaining macro-level human state development and history (J. Diamond, I. Morris, F. Fukuyama, D. Landes, D.Acemoglue, J. Henrich). McNeill asserts that for most of history human intelligence was completely blind when it came to microbiology and as a result to this day we underestimate the effects that pathogens have had on development of human societies. His sets out to correct that misconception.

The canonical example that everybody today is familiar with is of course the massive role that smallpox played in the colonization of the New World (Cortez-Aztecs and Pizarro-Incas) – this particular account got incorporated into mainstream historical zeitgeist by Diamond’s “Guns, Germs & Steel” written 20 years after McNeill’s “Plagues and Peoples”. McNeill’s paints the whole human history through this prism, confining New World colonization to just one chapter. His account is often speculative but is utterly mesmerizing. It’s as if you’ve been looking at various models of societal development (institutions, culture, geography) and then realized that you’ve been missing a huge confounding variable all along.

A sampling of ideas:

- Mutual accommodation between host and parasite. The latter doesn’t want kill or be killed by the former, feeding on the host is the main intent, and it usually takes a few co-evolutionary attempts to get this right. Viruses/bacteria have vastly faster evolution rates relative to humans of course, so to stabilize the response need on the order of 120-150 years(?). A series of epidemics may finally result in an endemic infection for a given population and appropriate population density.

- Another little pearl as lesson learned: the more diseased the community the less destructive epidemics become.

- Micro (pathogens) vs macro (state-driven extraction, warfare) parasites. Expansion of civilization as a macroparasitic activity in two ways: state/nobles taxing the populace (typically peasants) without suffocating it, and larger (city-centric) civilization more easily consuming virgin rural populations of peripheral tribes with aid of infection (digestion metaphor).

- Disease gradient (North [cool, dry] to South [warm, moist]) as a factor in human expansions (North makes it much harder for parasites to survive outside the host). Fascinating implications for Chinese and India development for example. In China centralized state established relatively rapidly along the Yellow river but took a few centuries further south in Yangtze river delta. In India state expansion into south east direction was badly impeded and in fact McNeill's views the caste system as social response to inability to find immunological balance between civilized diseases of the city and various 'peoples of the forest'. It is instructive to compare these with Fukuyama's account of state formation and decay in China and India. (Also, note the differences between early human expansions from south to north in Mediterranean/Europe and north to south when humans first entered the Americas).

- Today it is hard to comprehend the disproportional effect of diseases on regional population sizes throughout history. Until 20th century disease was by far the biggest killer and dwarfed any military conflict. E.g. Black death wiped out a third of European population and about half of China when it hit. Smallpox in Americas wiped out 90% off the bat and bottomed out at 95% death rate. Estimates of Mediterranean plague (6th century AD) are in 25-50 million range. Staggering.

- Such population losses had to have had an effect on social fabric, taxation, religions, warfare, imperial expansions in all sorts of ways. For example throughout the book McNeills speculates on rise and fall of various religions as a function of disease conditions on the ground. Buddhism with its insistence on escape from suffering and neglect of earthly possessions was very suitable for India which had great difficulties finding proper balance with microparasites which in turn decreased extractive margins for macro-parasites. Contrast to Confucianism in China. Conversion of Amerindians to Christianity (Europeans must have had the god on their side for local populations to suffer such losses…). Rise of Christianity in Mediterranean early in AD which explained early infections disease cycles much better than paganism. Rise of Enlightened Deism in Europe when some semblance of control of one's life became a possibility with the help of early medical advances.

- Some other effects. Moslem expansion as Roman and Persian empires took heavy losses to plagues in preceding centuries. Mongols' connecting networks were part of their success but also spread disease which ironically enough eventually hit Mongols themselves possibly precipitating their loss to China. 18th Century British domination over France (British experienced appreciable population growth having accepted inoculation practices before continental Europe)

- Nice correction to Henrich's thesis of opaque knowledge being preserved by culture due to positive effects. Often true, but not always - religious pilgrimages coupled with mass group ablutions had rather negative effect as they often acted as literal disease pools with pronounced infection rates. I guess you'd have to look on the net religion effect to make the final call so opaque "beneficial" knowledge thesis may stand.

- Important transition in 1900 when in Europe the sanitation practices finally made the population growth in cities self-sustaining. No longer required constant replenishing of population from surrounding rural areas. That was a change to 5 thousand year-long pattern of city-village population flow relationship. Economic

and social side effects ensued.

Lauren Bedson says

This book by William McNeil offers an interesting interpretation of the way that epidemic disease has shaped the course of world history from ancient times to the present day, a topic that the author asserts has been neglected in traditional historical accounts. The book is written in a charmingly old-fashioned style which is pleasant to read, although it is at times a bit tediously wordy and the citations are sparser than I would like.

Nevertheless, here is one passage from the Introduction that I think provides a good example of the interesting theories underpinning this book:

"Disease and parasitism play a pervasive role in all life. A successful search for food on the part of one organism becomes for its host a nasty infection or disease. All animals depend on other living things for food, and human beings are no exception. Problems of finding food and the changing ways human communities have done so are familiar enough in economic histories. The problems of avoiding becoming food for some other organism are less familiar, largely because from very early times human beings have ceased to have much to fear from large-bodied animal predators like lions or wolves. Nevertheless, one can properly think of most human lives as caught in a precarious equilibrium between the microparasitism of disease organisms and the macroparasitism of large-bodied predators, chief among which have been other human beings."

Originally published in 1977, parts are noticeably antiquated, but it remains an interesting and thought-provoking work which has sparked my interest in learning much more about the bubonic plague and the medieval period.

GoldGato says

Civilized diseases. This is the book that first alerted me to the way some germs and viruses have altered human history, much as pigeons have become a part of our daily environment. As we have developed the previously virgin landscape of the world, we have unwittingly unleashed the microbes intent on destroying us. Tit-for-tat. Throw in the 'peoples' element, such as Roman legionnaires turning on their own communities or Mongols burning villages and their occupants into ashes, and one wonders why we are still here.

McNeill also looks at how different sectors of humanity handled the constant scourges. While Western Europe became more superstitious, the Moslems were somewhat more enlightened:

When you learn that epidemic disease exists in a county, do not go there; but if it breaks out in the county where you are, do not leave.

Book Season = Winter (when you're shivering with the flu)

Richard Reese says

Nobody comprehends the universe, because it is almost entirely out of sight. We also can't see the universe of microorganisms here on Earth, or fully comprehend their powerful influence. Historian William McNeill learned that disease has played a major role in the human journey, and he wrote a fascinating introduction to our intimate companions, the parasites, in Plagues and Peoples.

All critters eat. Hosts provide food, and parasites consume it. Large-bodied parasites, like wolves, are macro-parasites. Wolves kill their hosts. Micro-parasites include bacteria, viruses, and small multi-celled organisms. If they quickly kill their host, the banquet is short. A more stable strategy is to simply take a free ride on a living host, like the billions of bacteria that inhabit our guts, share our meals, and don't make us sick.

In healthy ecosystems, stability is the norm. Species coevolve, which encourages balance, like the dance of oak trees and squirrels, or the foxes and rabbits. Balance is disturbed by natural disasters, like when an invasion of organic farmers overwhelms an ecosystem with their plows, axes, and enslaved animals. A farming community is a mob of macro-parasites that weakens or destroys its ecosystem host over time. When parasites disturb balance, McNeill calls this disease. "It is not absurd to class the ecological role of humankind in its relationship to other life forms as a disease."

The ruling classes in civilizations behave like macro-parasites when they siphon nutrients away from the working class hosts that they exploit. To survive, the elites must keep enough farmers alive to maintain an adequate supply of nutrients. Elites rely on violence specialists to protect their host collection from other two-legged macro-parasites, like the bloodthirsty civilization across the river. In this scenario, the worker hosts are suffering from a type of disease (the elites) that is called endemic, because it allows them to survive.

Disease that kills the host is epidemic. "Looked at from the point of view of other organisms, humankind therefore resembles an acute epidemic disease, whose occasional lapses into less virulent forms of behavior have never yet sufficed to permit any really stable, chronic relationship to establish itself."

Our chimp and bonobo cousins continue to have a stable relationship with their ecosystem. Consequently, there are not seven billion of them. Like them, our pre-human ancestors evolved in a tropical rainforest, a warm and wet ecosystem with immense biodiversity. This diversity included many, many types of parasites, and they lovingly helped to keep our ancestors in balance. Life was good. "The balance between eater and eaten was stable, or nearly so, for long periods of time."

Then, some too-clever ancestors began fooling around with technology. With spears, we were able to kill more prey, and foolishly eliminate many of the rival predators that helped keep our numbers in check. By and by, our ancestors began leaving Africa, moving into cooler and drier climates. We left behind many tropical parasites, and explored new lands with far fewer parasites. We suffered less disease. We moved into new regions as skilled hunters, and encountered game animals that had no fear of us. With clever new technology, like clothing and huts, our ancestors could sidestep their biological limitations and survive in non-tropical habitats.

Antelope and tsetse flies are unaffected by the sleeping sickness parasites they carry. Many species of burrowing rodents live with the bubonic plague bacteria harmlessly. These relationships are old and stable, but a blind date with a new parasite can be fatal. With the advent of animal domestication, there were many blind dates. We began living in close proximity to other species, and their parasites, to which we had no

immunity. This gave birth to the deadly new diseases of civilization, and led to a long era of epidemics.

“Most and probably all of the distinctive infectious diseases of civilization transferred to human populations from animal herds.” Aborigines, who did not enslave herd animals, did not suffer from infectious disease. The same was true for Native Americans, even those who lived in the densely populated regions of Mexico, Central America, and the Andes.

Humans share many diseases with domesticated animals: poultry (26), rats and mice (32), horses (35), pigs (42), sheep and goats (46), cattle (50), and dogs (65). In addition to the diseases of civilization are ancient rainforest diseases like malaria and yellow fever, which were introduced to the Americas by the slave trade.

From 500 B.C. to A.D. 1200, as civilizations developed in different regions of Eurasia, each area developed pools of civilized diseases, some of which became quite popular. India has a wonderful climate for parasites, and it may be where smallpox, cholera, and plague parasites first entered human hosts. Bubonic plague slammed into a virgin population in the Mediterranean basin. The plague of Justinian (A.D. 542-543) hit hard, maybe killing 100 million, about half of Europe.

From 1200 to 1500, the isolated disease pools of Eurasia eventually connected with the others, creating one large pool of civilized diseases. Nomads, like the Mongols, transported parasites back and forth between China and Europe. Parasites also travelled by ship. Black Death began in China around 1331. Between 1200 and 1393, China’s population dropped by half. The disease arrived in Crimea in 1346, spread across Europe, and killed about a third of the people. Muslims believed that those killed by the plague were martyrs, chosen by the will of Allah. They mocked the Christian infidels who successfully limited the spread via quarantines.

Between 1300 and 1700, a number of epidemic diseases became domesticated. To survive, parasites required a steady supply of new hosts without immunity — these were mostly children. A population of 500,000 or more was needed to produce enough new hosts to support an ongoing infestation of measles. If a disease was too virulent, it would eliminate its hosts and die off. Over time, a number of serial killers softened into childhood diseases, like mumps, smallpox, and measles.

From 1500 to 1700, Old World diseases discovered the New World. Europeans and their African slaves were walking disease bombs, but they were mostly immune to the parasites they carried. Native Americans were a virgin population, having no immunity whatsoever to the new parasites, they were blindsided by catastrophic epidemics. The population of Mexico and Peru dropped 90 percent in 120 years.

Since 1700, science has made great advances in death control (not balanced by equal achievements in birth control). Vaccinations have been effective in controlling smallpox and polio. Antibiotics have temporarily provided several decades of relief from a number of infectious parasites. Sewage treatment and water purification systems have also provided temporary relief, during the bubble of abundant energy.

Industrial society, with its radically unhealthy way of life, has created new diseases of civilization, like cancer and heart disease. Influenza is a powerful wild card, because it rapidly mutates, sometimes into highly virulent forms. By the time the vaccines are mass-produced, the pandemic is over. Many new viral diseases, like Ebola and AIDS, are appearing, as the human swarm meets new and exciting rainforest parasites.

The plague bacterium still lives harmlessly in burrowing rodents and their fleas. Over the years, it has spread around the world. By 1940, it was carried by 34 species of burrowing rodents in America, and 35 species of fleas. By 1975, it was found across the western U.S., and portions of Canada and Mexico. Black rats are the vector that moves the parasites into humans. As long as the gas-guzzling garbage trucks keep running

regularly, we’ll be safe, maybe.

Modern consumers have had little exposure to epidemic disease, but our elaborate, energy-guzzling systems of death control only provide temporary protection. Sewage treatment, water purification, effective antibiotics, and industrial agriculture have a limited future in a Peak Energy world.

Luke says

This book is a really important one, but it's been so foundational that this piece has been eclipsed by numerous others. McNeill's primary contribution is centering disease as a subject of historical analysis. Before this work, little thought had been given to disease's role in world history. Clearly, disease was pervasive and affected everybody on earth, but nobody gave thought to the impact disease had on historical processes themselves. Now, there are numerous works that look at disease in a variety of periods and places. William McNeill's own son, John McNeill, has followed in his father's footsteps by producing *Mosquito Empires*, for example.

Because the work has been eclipsed, it is not nearly as important as it once was. Much of the text is rooted in hunches that McNeill has based on some level of evidence (although not enough). Thanks to advances in the sciences (and the powerful rise of the history of science/history of medicine), historians can now use data beyond historical documents to better examine the history of disease.

Trista says

This is what I call an "airplane book" as no one will bother you when you read it because its so alarming. Other great books on this genre (different authors) are "Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers" by Mary Roach (much more readable, this author has a charming sense of humor) and the "The Red Market: On the Trail of the World's Organ Brokers, Bone Thieves, Blood Farmers, and Child Traffickers" by Scott Carney (a very readable author, very much in tune and sympathetic to the subject at hand).

I don't know if this is McNeil's thesis, but it is certainly as dry as one.

McNeil is needlessly dry and academically formal to the point where you can barely pin down what he's saying. He's an author who can't past his own writing style to make direct statements for his readers to understand. There's entire sentences that are incapable of being quoted for factual statements because no one can break them down other than perhaps a specialist in epidemics or similar pathological vectors. On a lark, I quoted a few on my blog to see if a few Ph.D.s could make sense (History, English, etc.) of the statements. We were unable to come to a consensus.

Once you get past that, its an interesting take on how disease, especially parasites, have altered the course of human evolution and civilization. Readers will learn interesting points, such as Sickle Cell Anemia may have developed to combat malaria in Africa and other environs, hence its predominance in specific ethnic groups from those geographic areas.

Katarina says

Honestly, I was a bit disappointed with *Plagues and Peoples*. I had expected discussion of exactly what cultural ramifications disease epidemics have had throughout history. The movement of disease and the large-scale changes that forced upon populations throughout history was discussed in great detail, but the CULTURAL impact of all this was not the focus. Instead, McNeill took a very empirical, scientific view of history, and chose to look at it as a series of events and interactions between organisms. While the cultural changes are mentioned, they are not the focus. For example, in the chapter about the plague epidemics, McNeill focuses on transmission of the disease, possible origins, effects of that disease on the prevalence of others, and quarentine measures enacted in response. There are brief mentions of anti-Semetism and the Flagellents, but they are a divergence from the focus. I would have preferred to read more about how Plague inspired such movements, forced the rearrangement of political systems, and created conditions that allowed science and art to develop rapidly in its wake.
I also felt that the text was quite dryand often pendantic. Many points were hammered home repeatedly, chapter after chapter, to the point where I really didn't want to read about them anymore. some chapters were worse than others; the first two chapters, on pre-history and ancient history struck me as especially tedious and repetitive. The chapters on the middle ages and the "discovery of the New World" periods were most interesting; perhaps because I was already aquainted, to an extent, with the ramifications of disease in those periods. The final chapter, disease after 1700, was also fairly interesting; it focused on the roots of medical advancement, social change that doctors were able to bring about, and modern (20th centure) epidemics. It was slightly limited in scope, as the book was written in the 1970s-- ithe rise of anti-biotic resistant bacteria and AIDS were not issues at the time. I feel that epidemic disease is again a threat to our society, but at the time of publication, that didn't seem possible. As a result, I found the conclusion bland.

Angie says

Only a historian would know how to beat a dead horse to this extreme. Unfortunately, the redundancy in the first section was enough to kill the interesting stuff...read this only if you have trouble sleeping or it's required reading for a school course.

Adam says

While the book's subject matter is fairly interesting, McNeill has a tendency to repeat himself and uses language that can only kindly be described as verbose.

One notices that the tone of the text is quite long-winded and repetitive.
A few paragraphs in and you begin to perceive a discourse, of sorts, that is familiar, the reader having read a similar statement earlier in the text, and whose verbage is unnecessarily convoluted.

Catch my drift? Try 300 Pages of that.

Linus Williams says

McNeill in this seminal volume offers a very interesting and informative overview of the past interactions and continuing interactions between so-called "macroparasitism"--that is, predation of man upon man--and "microparasitism"--the relation between tribes or nations of men and the organisms in their microenvironment. This may be one of the first books to systematically examine the equilibrium that develops over time as diseases adapt to hosts, and how that microparasitic equilibrium can be disturbed by macroparasitic movements of people, whether through war or trade or expansion. A book that anybody who is interested in medical history should read.

Briana Patterson says

This book was alright. The author knows his stuff and he's very informative. Most of his conclusions are reasonable, and he provides a fresh look at history that his contemporaries have not accounted for.

However, I hold several reservations concerning his guesswork where information was lacking. McNeill readily admits that he's working with limited sources and most of his conclusions are fine, but there are times when I don't agree with his logic. There's also some outdated concepts within his arguments - natural for a book published in 1976, such as the talk about the parallel evolution of man.

McNeill often gives the course of disease a little *too* much credit in the course of human history. Microparasite (disease vs. humans) and Macroparasitic (Man vs. Man or animals vs. man) are not the sole motivations in human behavior. Things don't happen that mechanically.

Finally, I had a lot of difficulty with the redundancy and verbose dialog. It wasn't *difficult*, just excessive.

Eh. It gets a 2-star from me for the last part. Not quite a 3. Still, although it's not a light read, it's an educational one. Worth a look.

Becky says

Finally finished this book. It took me a while to read it due to personal stuff and the subject matter, but it ended up being one of my favorites (hence the labor of love category). It being a favorite is leading me to believe I have a soft spot for environmental history. Yes the book was much about epidemiology, but the focus was also very much on how certain diseases were possible within certain environments – how they got there, how they survived there, and how those environments were affected in the way of future outbreaks, food cultivation, population growth/ reduction, etc.

You will not get a lot of unknown facts about diseases from this book as the majority of the time periods addressed were prior to formal record keeping and disease identification. However, you will get a great exercise of the mind in the way of a priori thinking and cause and effect relationships. McNeil does a great job of showing us how the evidence that is available - evidence from sources such as religious writings, population records, and recent day archeological finds - can be constructed to shed light on when certain pandemics/epidemics broke out, what they more than likely were, how the specific viruses affected populations, how the human body reacted to the viruses over time, and how those viruses in return reacted to

the human body.

Although this book's main subject is epidemiology, it is very similar (although a precursor) to books like Guns, Germs and Steel in that it addresses various macroparisitic and microparisitic effects on the growth of civilizatoins. However, its focus on diseases makes it particularly interesting and provides a sort of mental anchor when thinking about the multitude of variables that has shaped our world. Yes, I can appreciate that after reading this book I am now more aware of the major viruses/diseases that affected our history, but more than anything, that ebb and flow thinking of how the big picture came to be is more concreted in my mind. And this is the book’s greatest value to me.
