

Foreword to William H. McNeill (1986) *De pest in de geschiedenis*, trans. Tinke Davids. Amsterdam: De Arbeiderpers, pp. 7–10.

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The publisher has asked me to provide this book with a foreword. It hardly seems necessary to me. McNeill takes the reader immediately to the issue at hand, in a way that no introduction can improve upon. How was it possible that Hernando Cortez could defeat the mighty Aztec empire with an army of 600 men? As McNeill makes clear, this question cannot be answered if we do not take account of the fact that Cortez was accompanied by an ally invisible to friend and foe alike: a smallpox virus that wreaked terrible havoc among the native Indians, [1][#N1] but spared his own men. How can that be explained? What made the Spaniards immune to a disease to which the Indians succumbed in large numbers? Within half a century of Cortez's expedition, [2][#N2] the population of Mexico was literally decimated: from 30 million in 1519 to 3 million in 1568. This enormous decline cannot be attributed solely to the Spaniards' reign of terror. The causes must also include the diseases the Spaniards brought with them. This leads to the question of how the Spaniards got these diseases, and why they themselves did not die from them. And how was it that the Aztecs did not carry diseases equally deadly for the Spaniards?

These are the very concrete questions that put McNeill onto the trail of a fascinating investigation into the role of diseases and epidemics in human history. The topic is, of course, not entirely new. McNeill mentions the bacteriologist Hans Zinsser, author of *Rats, Lice and History* (1935), a book that is still worth reading, very well written and displaying impressive scholarship. *Plagues and Peoples*, however, offers considerably more – not only interesting historical material, but, above all, theoretical ideas to position and process all this material.

The problem of the relationship between epidemics and social development is rarely addressed systematically in the historical literature. Historians tend to regard epidemics as 'external factors' that influence history capriciously and unexpectedly. *Plagues and Peoples* shows that a more comprehensive approach, which also includes the development of pathogenic micro-parasites in historical research, does more justice to the facts. Not only do microparasites and the epidemics they cause affect human history, but the development of human societies also influences the development of the parasites. The history of parasites and hosts is a single one.

These days in science, a great deal of value is attached primarily to analytical methods that allow for ever-finer distinctions to be made and phenomena to be reduced to ever-smaller elements. There is not even a suitable term for methods that work in the opposite direction: 'synthetic' sounds much less reliable than 'analytical'.

Nevertheless, there is a great need not only for increasingly extensive detailed knowledge, but also for insight into the connections that determine the relationships between these details.

McNeill shows how fruitful an approach orientated towards synthesis can be. With a minimum of theoretical ballast, he succeeds in making a connection between history and biology. He points out that, in almost every type of human contact – in addition to all sorts of other interactions – there is also an exchange of germs. This is true of contacts between individuals; it applies a fortiori to contacts between societies. The example of Cortez and the Aztecs shows how fatal the consequences can be when members of a population that has gone through a long process of immunization against certain diseases come into contact with a population that has never encountered these diseases.

Cortez and his army were part of a 'disease reservoir' that had formed on the Euro-Asian continent over many centuries. A large part of *Plagues and Peoples* is dedicated to the emergence and expansion of this disease reservoir after 1500. The most surprising thing about this is that this history is a 'different' history. It concerns the same major military, political, economic, cultural developments and events that constitute the familiar terrain of historiography. However, a dimension has been added to the description, revealing hidden connections. Almost playfully, McNeill thus reveals something of what Norbert Elias called the infrastructure of the history of human societies: the development of the unintentional interdependencies within which all more purposeful actions take place.

As in his other work, McNeill easily transcends the limitations of a historiography bound to a single country or time period. He takes as his field of study the whole terrain to which every period, every society belongs: the history of humanity as a whole. Here, too, the choice of a particularly wide-ranging perspective stems not only from a non-committal personal interest, but also from an understanding of the real connections revealed by this history – even long before the rise of modern industrial states and the 'capitalist world system'. (There are still sceptics who claim not to be able to imagine anything as general as 'humanity'. Reading *Plagues and Peoples* might help them to realize a little more of the reality to which this generic term refers).

It is above all the broad scope of the argument that makes *Plagues and Peoples* such an impressive book. It demonstrates the interweaving of 'social' and 'biological' factors. It helps to 'biologise' historical and sociological thinking, and to 'historise' and 'sociologise' the sociobiological study of the human. And it does all of this not in the form of an abstract programmatic treatise, but by sketching a lively panoramic picture of the ever-changing bio-social structures in which people live. If there is a work written in recent years that can be called a successful product of a historical-materialistic vision, this is it – even though the author may not on the whole appreciate it being called that.

When, many years ago, during a lecture, I referred to McNeill's observations on the generally weakening effect of schistosomiasis among peasant populations, some students reacted very indignantly. It was an unacceptable thought for them that the miserable fate of peasants could be attributed to flatworms, rather than solely to human oppressors. *Plagues and Peoples* is not directed towards the supporters of such an exclusively moralistic worldview. It is devoted to those interested in trying to develop a perspective based on verifiable facts and reasoning that makes it possible to comprehend an increasing number of aspects of human existence.

References

McNeill, William H. (1976) *Plagues and Peoples*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Zinsser, Hans (1935) *Rats, Lice and History*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Translator's notes

1. While in some instances specifying and using the terms 'Aztecs' and 'Inca', McNeill, as reflected here by Goudsblom, used the term 'Indians' to refer to the indigenous populations of the Americas when not specifying a particular polity or people. [\[#N1-pt1\]](#)
2. McNeill (e.g. 1976: 19–20, 212–206) preferred to use the form 'Hernando Cortez' throughout, which is reflected in Goudsblom's usage in this preface, whereas 'Hernando Cortes' was the form used by Cortés himself in his letters. The stress accent on the final syllable, i.e. 'Cortés' was added more consistently in print as Spanish orthography changed over time, and his first name gradually became shortened to 'Hernan' in the course of the nineteenth century. [\[#N2-pt1\]](#)

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