The past twenty years have seen a great increase in the degree of prominence given to population behaviour in both the description and explanation of historical change. General textbooks concerned with major historical changes, such as the development of industrial society out of the pre-industrial world, now devote a substantial part of their discussion of the transition to population history as a matter of course, where at one time a passing mention of the population rise would have been thought sufficient. Demographic history, the more technical adjunct of this enlarged interest, has developed pari passu and now ranks with other similar specialisms such as econometric history, especially in French historical studies. A high proportion of the most important work of this type, particularly in the 1960s, was carried out in France.

Professor McNeill has written a book which reflects a conviction that population history is outstandingly important to the understanding of human history. He makes it clear that in his view historians have seriously underplayed the significance of disease in determining the course of events. ‘We all want human experience to make sense’, he writes, ‘and historians cater to this universal demand by emphasizing elements in the past that are calculable, definable, and, often, controllable as well. Epidemic disease, when it did become decisive in peace or in war, ran counter to the effort to make the past intelligible. Historians consequently played such episodes down.’ (p.4). He sets out to repair past omissions in this regard, modestly remarking that he aims to provide a target for others to shoot down in due course. Indeed McNeill’s work is an eloquent plea to reconsider the independent importance of epidemic disease in deciding the fate of cities, nations and civilisations, and in shaping their intellectual and spiritual outlook. The rise of Christianity (pp. 122-3), no less than the decline of Athens (pp. 105-6) is to be attributed, in part at least, to the impact of severe mortalities.

Plagues and peoples, like several of McNeill’s other books, is history on the grand scale, and draws upon a remarkably wide range of empirical material. The book is organised round the related concepts of microparasitism and macroparasitism. Microparasites are those organisms such as viruses or bacteria, which live within the body of a host and draw sustenance from his body. Macroparasites also depend upon other animals for their food but do not live within them. From the point of view of a rabbit, a fox is a macroparasite. Since men ultimately became the most formidable of all hunting animals their macroparasites have chiefly been other men. McNeill, for example, regards early civilisations as involving macroparasitism on the part of the ruling elites. ‘In the early stages the macroparasitic basis of civilization remained harsh and clear… the hard-pressed peasantry that supported priests and kings and their urban
hangers-on received little or nothing in return for the food they gave up, except for a somewhat uncertain protection from other, more ruthless and short-sighted plunderers’ (p.7).

In McNeill’s view men throughout history have struggled to make a successful and stable resolution of the twin sets of problems caused by micro- and macroparasitism. Sooner or later host and parasite arrive at a mutually tolerable accommodation or perish, but each such equilibrium once achieved must sooner or later founder under the influence of some change in relationship of host and parasite or of the arrival upon the scene of a new agent which upsets the balance, as when a new disease of great virulence appears, or warfare (in his analysis a form of macroparasitism) disrupts society.

Using the two concepts of microparasitism and macroparasitism enables McNeill to divide human history into a limited number of major periods to each of which he devotes a chapter. The change from one period to another is marked by great changes in the host/parasite balance, and since such changes usually affect the whole world rather than a country or a continent, McNeill is at great pains to avoid Europocentric treatment of world history.

The result is invariably suggestive and stimulating. Plagues and peoples is packed with information and ideas which have been too long peripheral to historical analysis when they should be central to economic and social history. McNeill, for example, brings out very effectively the nature of the demographic relationship between town and countryside in all pre-industrial societies, where a steady inflow of people from the countryside is necessary to the continued existence of the town. He does a great service to the understanding of past societies simply by demonstrating the scale of the impact of great epidemics and their utterly unpredictable incidence. We may also be grateful for his lucid presentation of the reasons why many diseases are in all probability comparatively recent in origin, ‘civilised’ diseases in his terminology. And if the determination to be readable sometimes results in rather odd combinations of the archaic and the innovatory (McNeill is fond of referring to the burst of mortality following an epidemic, as a ‘die-off’, but also uses phrases such as ‘ere long’), it is one of the book’s chief virtues that it should prove attractive to the general reader no less than the specialist.

Yet Plagues and peoples is too partisan and too eclectic to be entirely convincing. It is one thing to stress the frightful impact of European diseases upon the native population of Mexico in seeking to explain the astonishing ease with which the Spaniards mastered the Aztecs. The crippling losses which follow exposure to ‘civilised’ infections and the psychological disorientation which accompany the losses is well attested both in central and Andean America in the sixteenth century and in the Pacific more recently. But it seems a disservice to the general theme of the book to include speculation, however carefully hedged with reservations, about the effect upon Protestant unity during the early years of the Reformation of the premature ending of a discussion between Luther and Zwingli because of an outbreak of the ‘sweat’ in Marburg in 1529.
Certainly if both types of event are to be considered it would have been helpful to suggest more clearly distinctions between those effects of epidemic disease whose character is beyond reasonable doubt, and those whose significance is much less clear. Not to make such distinctions is to invite the sceptic to use the most implausible or uncertain illustrations to discredit the general thesis.

There is also a more general difficulty with *Plagues and peoples*. Since the behaviour of a population is always a function both of fertility and mortality, to consider mortality alone can result in over-simplification. It is just as important to any discussion of the reasons for population decline in the later Roman Empire that population appears to have failed to recover following the Antonine epidemic of the second century and the fresh epidemic outbreak a century later as that it fell substantially in the wake of these pestilences. And the failure to make good losses may be as much a function of failing fertility as of continued high mortality. To make good even swingeing losses of a quarter or a third of the population within a generation or two does not require abnormally high rates of growth. Indeed recovery from occasional severe mortalities is part of the normal lot of all animal populations. Epidemic losses are the most visible but they are not necessarily the most important influences on population trends. Even in the case of the Black Death there is room for argument about its significance in relation to the decline of European population in the later Middle Ages. Its immediate impact was to cause a severe reduction in numbers throughout most of the continent, but there is a sufficient number of English manors in which the trend towards lower population was well established before 1348 and where the trend line was picked up again within a decade or two of the Black Death, to make one wary of supposing that the arrival of bubonic and pneumonic plague was the prime reason for the fall in numbers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Despite its deficiencies *Plagues and peoples* is to be welcomed. In the late twentieth century industrial world death has become largely an affair of the aged. About three-quarters of all deaths occur to those aged seventy and above. In traditional societies death was as much a feature of youth as of age, with up to one half of all deaths occurring among children under ten. Moreover fluctuations in mortality from year to year were once as striking and as unpredictable as changes in the weather and the harvest, while nowadays, outside times of war, mortality scarcely changes from one year to the next. In seeking to grasp the nature of the differences between the present and the past, whether in relation to individual lives and outlook or the behaviour of economies and societies, a principal feature of any description or analysis should be the changing nature of mortality. McNeill recognises the importance of this and provides much that is helpful to consider. His book deserves wide readership, though the readers who will profit most will be those who read with a critical eye.

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