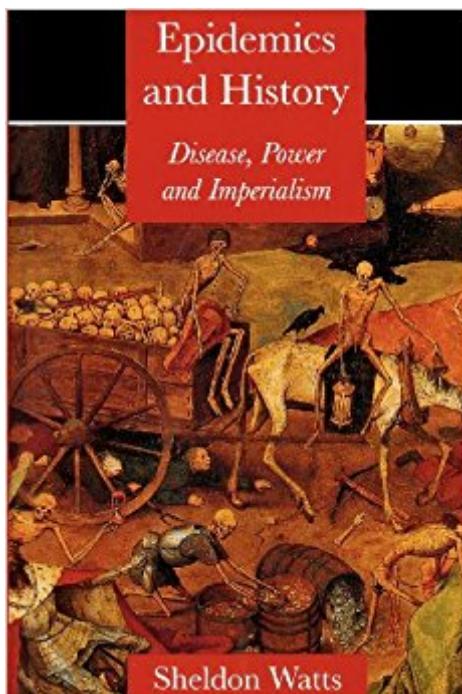


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Epidemics And History: Disease, Power And Imperialism



Synopsis

This book is a major and wide-ranging study of the great epidemic scourges of humanity—plague, leprosy, smallpox, syphilis, cholera, and yellow fever/malaria—over the last six centuries. It is also much more. Sheldon Watts, a cultural and social historian who has spent much of his career studying and teaching in the world—South, applies a wholly original perspective to the study of global disease, exploring the connections between the movement of epidemics and the manifestations of imperial power in the Americas, Asia, Africa, and in European homelands. He shows how the perceptions of whom a disease targeted changed over time and effected various political and medical responses. He argues that not only did Western medicine fail to cure the diseases that its own expansion engendered, but that imperial medicine was in fact an agent and tool of empire. Watts examines the relationship between the pre-modern and modern medical profession and such epidemic disasters as the plague in western Europe and the Middle East; leprosy in the medieval West and in the nineteenth-century tropical world; the spread of smallpox to the New World in the age of exploration; syphilis and nonsexual diseases in Europe—connection with Asia; cholera in India during British rule; and malaria in the Atlantic Basin during the eras of slavery and Social Darwinism. He investigates in detail the relation between violent environmental changes and disease, and between disease and society, both in the material sphere and in the minds and spirits of rulers and ruled. This book will become the standard account of the way diseases—arising through chance, through reckless environmental change engineered by man, or through a combination of each—were interpreted in Western Europe and in the colonized world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

good balanced addition to the histories of disease.

Watts' book is a series of related essays about the social construction of 6 major diseases. He has poured years of research into this work. The thesis of each chapter is fascinating, and most may well be correct. For example, he posits that biblical leprosy was not Hansen's Disease, and further that medieval leprosy was a social category, and that the "lepers" of that time did not have the disease. There could be something to this. But this book cannot do better than raise the questions. There are both scientific and historical aspects to this book, but the editing did not bring the writing close to scientific standards. Many generalizations are based on a single piece of evidence. Primary sources are cited without considering that the author's comments may have been self-serving. Epidemics and History loses its way badly when it tries to intuit the intentions of groups of people, rather than letting their actions speak for themselves. A word count would reveal unusually high frequencies for "desire," "intention," "understanding," "perception," and so forth. I wonder to what extent groups of people through history have been aware of themselves as groups, as the book assumes throughout. Further, it tries to inflame with unnecessary emotive language. Pity. Academic anti-imperialism was the wrong voice for this work. Watts' research is interesting, theses provocative. But the writing is all wrong. Where were the editors? If you are interested in the history of disease, you do want to know what Watts says. But the flawed writing makes this a frustrating read.

great book.

helps one to realize that diseases have been helping to keep the human population in check even though we can't!

In this book by Sheldon Watts, the reader is introduced to a global approach to the connections between epidemic disease and the attainment and allocation of power. Watts uses a comparative approach to the concepts of disease and power and thus in each of his six chapters on epidemics, he analyses the particular disease in the context of both one European nation and one non-Western nation. This approach serves the purpose of comparing and contrasting the efforts of European and

non-Western nations in their reactions to epidemics. The differences in the ways that different cultures both acknowledged and sought to address the disease in question is very enlightening in terms of comparative history and it also serves to buttress Watts main thesis.

Watts' main argument in his book is that since the early modern period in world history epidemic disease has been used by imperial powers as a means of control, and thus an understanding of disease and epidemics is crucial to a fuller understanding of imperialism in general. Watts uses distinctive historical epidemics to illustrate his argument including the bubonic plague, leprosy, smallpox, syphilis, cholera, yellow fever, and malaria. Each chapter engages in defining these diseases in terms of both their physical and constructed sense, and then explains how these diseases were viewed in their respective periods. Watts argues that this is very important because diseases cannot be fully understood outside of their social and political context. This argument is the book's strongest point. In each of the chapters Watts analyzes the constructs, uses, and methods of control used by the ruling elite to combat the spread of disease. Using a narrative that keeps the reader engaged, Watts addresses the invention of disease control during the bubonic plague in Western Europe and the Middle East, the construct of leprosy in the Medieval West and the Imperial Tropics, the use of smallpox in both the New World and the Old, the perception and commercialization of syphilis in Western Europe and East Asia, the role of science and politics in controlling cholera in Britain and India, and the human cost of development when assisted by malaria and yellow fever in Atlantic Africa and the New World. Watts does a great job of illustrating the course of epidemic disease in terms of imperialist history and offers varying levels of insight into what role epidemic diseases have played in altering the course of history. For the reader with a casual interest in epidemics this book offers a broad survey of seven major epidemics and how imperial powers at the time dealt with them. This broad take on epidemics and imperialism can also however be seen as a weakness as well as a strength. Because of both the multiple timeframes involved and the multiple diseases, this book is unable to offer any in depth analysis to any one of the particular diseases. Indeed, each one of these chapters has a great potential to be a book unto itself. In taking this broad approach, Watts is forced to limit his analysis of certain regions and time periods and in doing so his research raises as many questions as it answers. The main fault of this work however is the ideological bent that permeates much of the research. The writing at times comes off as being very anti-imperialist and Watts uses inflammatory language such as when he refers to one Spanish official as a "genocidal terrorist" (pg 130). This anti-imperialist viewpoint also shows through in some of the inferences that he makes in regards to European intentions, implying at one point that the English engaged in practices that

were meant to purposefully spread smallpox to the native inhabitants. (pg 101) Such polemical language and inferences weakens Watts' main argument by drawing attention away from the otherwise engaging narrative and though provoking arguments. Taken as a whole however this book is an engaging read that illuminates a perspective of epidemic disease in a way that draws broad lines of comparison between imperialism and epidemics. The historian who has little knowledge of the field of medical or disease history will surely find this book valuable and insightful, and the scholar of epidemic disease should find this book to have a refreshing perspective on the relationship of disease and power in world history.

Seldon Watts embarked on a very difficult and highly political issue. You may agree or disagree that imperialist powers used contagious diseases as yet another weapon but everyone has to agree that this is a new perspective in viewing history. For example, I was amazed by his analysis in Leprosy and found it to be logic, even though I don't have his sources available. Sometimes the scientific data seem a bit weak but if you want details on each and every disease there are other books to consult. This book talks about politics. I see this great book as a cry from a scientist of the "Third world" who reminds that science (and charity) is not as neutral as we sometimes consider it to be. Personally I believe it is a "must", even if you disagree with the author politically.

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