

Andrew Jakabovics

Week 8-

I really wanted to like this book more. His data collection skills are quite prodigious, and he does an admirable job of presenting the copious data in the text, tables, and maps. Where he falls woefully short is on the analysis of the data collected. In general, I found his explanations for the phenomena he describes overly generalized. Take, for example, the description of the problems found in cities. Because his lens is environmental change on a global scale, he indicates that the problems of pollution and air quality are persistent in cities across the globe. He glosses over profound cultural and socio-economic differences across those cities. In the second part of the book, there is certainly agency to be found in human activity, but McNeill's biggest complaint is that "they know not what they do." In the first part, however, there is very little human agency to be found. To get to a question- how much of my complaint is based on the book's structure? Did he hamstring himself from more in-depth analysis because of the way he arranged his chapters?

Here's my over-simplified reduction of the book:

[Greek Element]

The way it was

The way it is (global)

The way it is in Place a, b, c, ..., z

See, it's the same in all these places (even when the causes are different)

Bad, bad, silly humans

To be fair, I don't know that a litany of ecological sins arranged by region rather than by "sphere" would be more insightful. There is something to be said for the global nature of the problems. I just sort of wish he were able to link the ends to the means in a more precise way. Just because certain problems are pervasive does not mean the causes are the same in each instance. He begins to demonstrate an awareness of the differences across places in the chapter on air pollution, but he downplays differences in means in favor of stressing the commonality of the end.

Is the solution really cleaner energy sources, lower mortality and lower fertility? Cleaner energy is technological, but mortality and fertility (I take them separately, even though we've seen some evidence of the relationship between the two) are social. I think everybody wants cleaner energy, but one thing McNeill seems to indicate is that each new energy source seems to bring its own problems with it. Are we to assume there is some magic energy source that is completely non-polluting at every point of its lifecycle? His fertility solution is equally vexing. He writes that "without Fordism, without mass consumption, the environmental history of the twentieth century would have been much calmer." (p. 318) What does it mean, then, that the solution is to better educate women, given that better educated women have lower fertility rates? Don't they also have a higher income and standard of living which would increase demand? (Did anybody else find the solution also somewhat denigrating? Is this the modern equivalent of devaluing women's work, now brought into the public sphere?)

Finally, is it of any significance that the book was published by a mainstream press rather than an academic one? Granted, W.W. Norton is generally considered a scholarly imprint, but it's not a university press. Does its provenance imply a general rather than specialized readership? Would McNeill have written it differently for an academic audience? (It's purely a speculative question, but I think it's worth discussing.)