H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark Harrison. *Disease and the Modern World: 1500 to the Present Day.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004. 270 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7456-2810-3.

Reviewed by Howard Phillips (Department of Historical Studies, University of Cape Town)
Published on H-SAfrica (October, 2007)

Not What the Doctor Ordered

This textbook for English-speaking students is another step in the welcome integration of disease into the mainstream of twenty-first-century historiography, for it achieves two objectives admirably. Not only does it provide a well-informed synthesis of the abundant literature on the history of biomedicine published over the last two decades, but it also relates this closely to the key socioeconomic, demographic and cultural developments which made the modern world. Written in the social history of medicine genre by the director of the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine at Oxford, the book is the product of a mind in top gear, well abreast of both fields of historiography.

In eight tight chapters he examines the impact of infectious disease, especially in epidemic form, and how this furthered the rise of the modern state in particular. To his perceptive eye, "disease was central to the development of modern states and their machinery of government" (p. 2), and it is a major concern of his to unravel this connection. This does mean that Europe secures a large amount of the book's coverage, dominating six of the eight chapters–China gets barely a mention beyond the third epidemic of bubonic plague, India a little more (this is Harrison's previous historical turf), and Africa only passing reference, except on two occasions, viz. in relation to the disease consequences of the transatlantic slave trade and to HIV/AIDS. For the historian of Africa, therefore, this book will be of most use in providing the disease and scientific background to the continent's encounter with the biomedicine imported under the auspices of European colonization. Of indigenous African medicine and healers there is as little said as of Ayurvedic, Arabic, and Chinese medicine and practitioners. As usual, the experience of patients (on all continents) receives short shrift.

Like a good university textbook, *Disease and the Modern World* is rich in suggestions for further reading, contains a twelve-page glossary of technical terms (yet, surprisingly, no maps), and is always keen to demonstrate that history-writing is as contested a field as history-making. Harrison regularly alerts the reader to historiographical debates around key health topics, e.g., the origin of syphilis in Europe, the role of disease in paving the way for Europe's conquest of the Americas, Louis Pasteur and the germ revolution. Nor is he Whiggish in his depiction of the rise of biomedicine, pointing out many of the false starts, dead-ends, and wild-goose chases in its history. The book is therefore certainly not what the doctor ordered, but rather what her/his colleague in a department of history would prescribe.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Howard Phillips. Review of Harrison, Mark, *Disease and the Modern World: 1500 to the Present Day.* H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13722

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.