

Things to think about:

J. R. McNeill and William McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of World History* pp. 25-40, 75-81, 108-115, 137-154, 158-178, 186-189, 200-223, 230-252, 264-267, 279-288, 319-327

Why is this book subtitled “a bird’s-eye view”? How does the subtitle relate to the metaphor of “the human web” in the main title?

What is a human web? How can you tell when one has emerged? How thin to its constituent connections have to become before it ceases to exist?

Why does the domestication of plants and animals constitute such a significant historical watershed? How do the McNeill’s explain the emergence of domesticated breeds?

How can the McNeill’s tell that knowledge of plant reproduction “was surely age old”? (27)

What motivated people to abandon the life of hunter/gatherers for the more strenuous life of farmers?

What was the relation between climatic change and the beginnings of agriculture? Between the development of agricultural societies and modes of political organization?

Why did storable grain have greater historical impact than other agricultural products? (109)

How has the expansion, tightening, and loosening of the web influenced outbreaks of contagious disease?

How do the McNeill’s explain the different historical trajectories of the Eurasian web and other webs?

Why did medieval European merchants and bankers have greater freedom than their equivalents elsewhere? How do the McNeill’s relate this freedom to European agricultural practices such as the moldboard plow? (141)

In what ways could development on the Atlantic and Pacific flanks of Eurasia in the 15th century be considered parallel?

How did technology enable European expansion? Why was globally derived information so useful to Europeans, even in remote local markets?

How was the Atlantic slave trade related to other contemporary developments within the human web?

Why was the impact of the Siberian fur trade so similar to that of the fur trade in northern North America?

What role has trade played in expanding and maintaining webs? What about military activity? Why do the McNeills call Atlantic Europeans “the Mongols of the sea”? (178)

Why do the McNeills refer to the Scientific Revolution as “so-called”? (186) What was its relation to European global outreach?

Why do they claim that there wasn't much change between 1450 and 1800?

How did sugar production unite and divide societies around the Atlantic basin? (204)

What caused the growth of population between 1450 and 1800? What were the effects of the resulting mobility and migration?
What accounted for the post-1800 rise in human numbers and economic productivity?

Was the globalization that occurred before 1800 the same as current globalization?

What is the role of fossil fuels in the McNeills' story? What were the social and environmental effects of plentiful supplies of energy?

How do the McNeill's explain British pre-eminence at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution? At what point did the Industrial Revolution become global? Were its impacts the same everywhere?

Why did imperialism become cheap for European powers in the 19th century?

What accounted for the varying rate of success of other countries who tried to follow the European industrial/imperial model?

Why are so few individuals mentioned in this book? What effect does this absence have on its vision of human history?

Why are the McNeills confident that the human population growth of the last two centuries will not be repeated?

How is urbanization connected with fertility rates?

How do the McNeills approach global warming?

At the end of the book each McNeill writes his own conclusion. Are there any differences between their views of history? Do they use the comparison of human history to biological evolution in the same way? Are they equally optimistic or pessimistic?

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21H.421 Introduction to Environmental History
Spring 2011

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