

The Demographic Impact of the European Encounter

Disease—that is the viruses, bacteria and parasites imported from Europe or Africa—spread more rapidly than did the animals, plants and men that crossed the Atlantic. The Amerindian populations, who were adapted only to their own endemic microbes, were helpless in the face of these new perils. The Europeans had hardly set foot in the New World before smallpox broke out in Santo Domingo in 1493; it appeared in 1519 in besieged Mexico City, even before Cortez reached it, and in Peru in the 1530s, before the arrival of the Spanish soldiers. It spread to Brazil in 1560 and to Canada in 1635.⁸ This disease, against which Europe had become partially immunized, made deep inroads into the native population. The same was true of measles, influenza, dysentery, leprosy, plague (the first rats are said to have reached America in 1544-6), venereal diseases, typhoid and elephantiasis. All these diseases, whether carried by whites or blacks, took on a new virulence. There are of course still doubts about the exact nature of some diseases, but the virulent nature of the bacteriological invasion cannot be questioned: the Mexican population collapsed under the impact of several colossal epidemics—smallpox in 1521 and a form of 'plague' (perhaps typhus or influenza) in 1546, which made a

second, devastating appearance in 1576-7, when it caused two million deaths.⁹ Some of the West Indian islands were entirely depopulated. We must make a conscious effort to stop thinking of yellow fever as native to tropical America. It probably came from Africa. In any case, it appeared quite late on: in 1648 in Cuba, in 1685 in Brazil. From there it spread throughout the entire tropical zone of the New World. In the nineteenth century, it reached from Buenos Aires to the East Coast of North America and was even carried to the ports of Mediterranean Europe.¹⁰ It is impossible to think of Rio de Janeiro in the nineteenth century without being haunted by this mortal spectre. A detail worth noting: whereas the large-scale epidemics had previously decimated the indigenous population, this time it was the newly arrived whites who were most vulnerable to a disease which had become endemic. In Porto Belo, in 1780, the crews of the galleons succumbed to the sickness and the great ships had to winter in the port.¹¹ So the New World suffered a series of terrible scourges. They were to reappear when the Europeans settled in the Pacific islands, another biologically separate world. Malaria, for example, arrived late in Indonesia and in Oceania; it took Batavia by surprise and destroyed it in 1732.¹²

ENDNOTES

EXCERPTS FROM: *The Structures of Everyday Life: Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*: by Fernand Braudel, translated from the French by Sian Reynold. Copyright © 1979 by Librairie Armand Colin. English translation copyright © 1981 by William Collins, Ltd., London and Harper & Row, Publisher, Inc., New York, pp. 37-38. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

8. D.A. Brading, *Mineros y comerciantes en el México borbónico, 1763-1810*, 1975, p. 18; Nicolás Sanchez-Albornoz, *La Población de América latina desde los tiempos precolombinos*, 1973, p. 81; B.N. Chagny, *Variolè et chute de l'Empire aztèque*, unpublished thesis, Dijon, 1975.
9. Father A. Dávila, *Historia de la fundación y discurso de la provincia de Santiago de México, 1596-1625*, pp. 100, 118, 516-17.
10. N. Sanchez-Albornoz, *op. cit.*, p. 188.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-2.
12. A. Grenfeld Price, *The Western Invasions of the Pacific and its Continents*, 1963, p. 167.