

THE BIOLOGICAL FACTORS IN WORLD HISTORY

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Fundamental aspects of the human experience that are expressed in population patterns often receive insufficient attention in world history presentations. Politics and cultural achievements commonly gain greater emphasis, and recently even environmental considerations (which do however have a close connection to population dynamics) are gaining greater play.

But population patterns are rather basic, as they sum up encounters with disease or changes in food supply. A great deal of human history revolves around episodes of population crowding, in relation to available economic resources, and this remains true today. Migration, most obviously, reflects larger population changes, and introduces important regional changes in turn.

There are a few exceptions to the prevailing inattention. The famous Columbian Exchange, the exchanges of foods, diseases, animals and people that accompanied the arrival of Europeans and Africans in the Americas, is justifiably a fairly standard part of the framework of the early modern period in world history. But this exception highlights the extent to which other periods – for example, the global population decline around the end of the classical period – are not usually built into the conventional record.

Even recent developments may receive short shrift. Arguably, the Demographic Transition that emerged first in the West, then spread to other regions in the 20th century, is one of the most crucial changes in the modern human experience – but it ranks well below exploration of particular political movements in the common fund of knowledge.

Themes in biological history include population dynamics themselves, as the core topic important in itself and in reflecting developments in other areas. But discrete attention also must go to topics such as disease that affect population balance but obviously have wider impact on the lives of people in the past. Food history, which is happily gaining increased attention, also has its own interest. All the major topics connect strongly to the characteristic world history interest in human contacts: diseases spread, knowledge of foods spreads at crucial points, and population changes in turn fuel additional interaction as a result of migrations.

We live today at one of the more complex moments in human biological history. Global disease may have entered a new phase, thanks to a combination of scientific knowledge and the efforts of states and international organizations. Population patterns display intriguing regional differences, with implications for future migration and environmental challenge. Strong overall population growth combines with the much newer experience, in many regions, of population ageing. The patterns are fascinating, and obviously significant for present and future alike. They will gain greater meaning if they are assessed in light of the considerable knowledge we have about biological developments in the global past.

Questions to Consider:

1. What are the most important periods in human population history? Do they correspond with conventional world history periodization?
2. Why have some regions, historically, been more populous than others? Is the balance now changing?
3. How has disease history changed in modern times? Do we need more attention to current diseases, such as cancer, in a world history context?
4. Discuss the major changes, but also key continuities, in the history of human migration.