



Johan P. Mackenbach. A history of population health: rise and fall of disease in Europe

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This review might consist of one sentence: ‘Whatever type of epidemiologist you are, whether you are in public health, or in cancer, or in cardiovascular, or clinical, or even when you are a pure methodologist or statistician interacting with epidemiologists—just download this book.’

The pdf is free from the publisher’s site; the hardback version comes at a price, but is beautifully rendered by a publisher who specializes in history and ancient texts. By reading it, you will gain a tremendous amount of knowledge about health and diseases in populations: how health and diseases wax and wane, over time and between countries, over political and social systems. Yes, it is history, but it is not merely history: the author scrupulously discusses rivaling theories about the proximate and the ultimate causes of changes in health, differences in changes in health, rise and fall of diseases—from homicide to breast cancer, from Russia and Albania to Spain and Norway, covering two to three centuries of the whole of geographical Europe. Moreover, it is crammed with facts, graphs, and almost on each page points to further data to consult, or further reading. Also, the author clearly indicates what the ‘white areas’ are in our understanding and what additional data or research might be needed.

While the author is clearly passionate, intellectually and socially, about the health of the public, the epidemiologic rigor of reasoning comes first. One example: he indicates how almost all studies find a perfect relationship between more democratic (capitalist?) state arrangements and a better health for the public

at large. However, he continues that this relationship holds only cross-sectionally, and is less clear longitudinally—that is: ‘changes’ into a more democratic state, or the reverse, have little correlation with a beneficial or an adverse change in the health of the public. Thus, the author concludes that the apparent symbiosis of health and democracy must be confounded. He points out how a transition to both fascist and communist dictatorships in the early twentieth century resulted in many a swift and dramatic improvement of health—and, in reverse, how in Russia the (temporary) attempts towards a more western democratic state of affairs in the late twentieth century brought about a public health disaster. However much engaged the author is in promoting public health—an engagement that shows on every page of the book—he never loses his analytical strictness: thus, when longitudinal changes do not match cross-sectional findings, he wonders what is going wrong when making too hasty conclusions.

The book is therefore a great joy to read, perhaps not in one breath from cover to cover—as the information density is high—but piecemeal. Known concepts and known stories are reviewed, viewed from a different angle, and some stories pierced. For instance, when writing about violent deaths in war, the author points out that, yes, the number of wars has continued to greatly diminish over the past centuries in Europe, which seems a great relief and achievement of mankind—but the wars of the twentieth century took the most lives ever, also relative to the sizes of the populations affected.

Let me conclude with my initial phrase: just download and read. And good chances that you will be so captivated as to want your personal hardback copy.

Editor’s note See also the essay of Dr Mackenbach in this issue of EJE.

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