

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **Pathogenesis: How germs made history** *by Jonathan Kennedy*

Hardback: 384 pages  
Penguin ( Torva ) ISBN 1911709054  
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Kennedy, Reader in politics and global health at Queen Mary University of London, examines how bacteria and viruses have influenced history, by exploring eight major outbreaks of infectious diseases and their impact on the world.

The book is organised chronologically from the Neolithic era, through the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the aftermath of European colonisation and on to the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Intriguingly, Kennedy explores the rise of Christianity during the Plagues of Cyprian in the second and third centuries AD and posits that the early Christians, a small movement who stayed and looked after the sick while proclaiming an afterlife in the Kingdom of God, resulted in Christianity becoming a world religion. Surely though the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (c272-337) had a more significant influence. When Kennedy discusses lack of immunity to diseases, he describes how smallpox brought by Spanish Conquistadors decimated the Aztec population. By way of contrast he describes how partial immunity to malaria was exploited in the West African slaves trafficked to the North American plantations in 16th century. Further on, when referring to the Black Lives Matter movement, he concludes: "More than a century and half after the abolition of slavery, there remains a long way to go until African Americans have the same rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as their white counterparts". Kennedy explores further the effect of poverty on disease, discussing social inequality and the consequences of deprivation especially on Covid-19 outcomes in the world's poorer members of society particularly within high income countries. The author also notes the undoubted improvements in living standards in China over recent years but quotes the Chinese Covid-19 death rates as fewer than 15,000 suggesting that this book was partly written in the initial stages of the pandemic and will need updating in future editions.

This is a well written, readable and comprehensively referenced book, analysing the role of microbes in the history of the human race through the lens of a social scientist. It achieved 'book of the week' status from the BBC earlier this year and is aimed at the general interested reader. I would thoroughly recommend it. This book is stimulating, controversial and challenges the reader to think about the impact of microbes on the evolution of humankind.

**Sean Hughes**  
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