

Why History (Still) Needs Historians: Adventures at the Edge of Pandemic Studies

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Abstract

Two of the leading global crises of the present day—climate change and the resurgence of infectious diseases—both have deep histories. And in both cases, those histories are being constructed on the basis not of old archival documents, but of newly retrieved physical data coming from scientific methods of interrogating the material past. In his 2019 Presidential address to the American Historical Association, in fact, John McNeill called our present moment “Peak Document,” meaning that whereas our documentary archives were finite, because the sciences could generate their own new data about the past, they would soon outstrip written archives as the foundation for histories that will be written in the future.¹

Unbeknownst to McNeill when he delivered that address in early January 2020, the world was entering into a new era. Although the notion of “emerging diseases” was by then over 30 years old, the several decades after the eradication of smallpox in 1980 had brought parts of the world a sense of calm, a sense that humankind’s long history with infectious diseases was over. Even as Ebola, HIV, the persistent presence of tuberculosis and other diseases challenged that complacency, it has only been with the onset of COVID-19 that there has been a general awakening that, like modern climate change, humans have a lot to do with the disease environment we find ourselves in.

The need to interrogate these twin histories, therefore, is urgent. But will historians—trained to interpret the past through records humans themselves have created—play a role in writing these new histories? This talk will recount the journey of the author, trained as a historian of science and working throughout her career in the field of history of medicine, as she had engaged for more than a decade and a half with the emerging methods and findings of the palaeosciences. The history of plague—cause of some of the most lethal outbreaks the world has ever seen—has been transformed during this period, largely because of breakthrough developments in the sciences. Largely, but not entirely. Historians have been prompted to reinterrogate their sources and have pressed scientists to think beyond the narrow conceptions of pandemics they brought to their work. Although the relationship is still rather rocky, a new respect is emerging for what the *combined* efforts of scientific and humanist approaches can produce.

Keywords: genetics; Global Health History; plague; historical methods; pandemics

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¹ John McNeill, “Peak Document and the Future of History,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 1 (February 2020), 1–18.

Princeton University, she has taught and held fellowships at leading institutions such as Duke University, the Institute for Advanced Study, and All Souls College. Both her research and her teaching have been honored by top prizes, and she was recently recognized by having a prize named in her honor by the Medieval Academy of America. She is currently completing *The Black Death: A Global History*, which melds new insights from genetics with a reinterrogation of the documentary record of the world's most devastating pandemic. She can be followed on Twitter at @monicaMedHist.