

Plague for Profit

Carrie Laben

2021

a review of

The Monster Enters: COVID-19 and the Plagues of Capitalism by Mike Davis. O/R Books 2020

As he has done in the past for California wildfires and famine in India, Mike Davis contextualizes pandemic disease in a matrix of capitalism and deprivation that make a particular kind of disaster inevitable. In *The Monster Enters*, Davis chronicles the emergence of a new virus; confusion reigns about how it spreads, how deadly it might prove, and how best to stop it. Some governments downplay the danger for political or economic reasons; others are hamstrung in their response by neglected public health infrastructure. People suffer and die—poor people most of all.

This is an accurate, though high-level, summation of our current crisis. But what Davis shows is that it's also an accurate high-level summation of past epidemics from the 1918 influenza through the iterations of avian flu that plagued the late '90s and early aughts. The bulk of this book was first published in 2005 as *The Monster At Our Door*, a warning about the threat of avian influenza and other emerging viruses in the context of globalization. The new edition contains an introduction that links Davis's previous work with the details (as far as they were known in April 2020, when he wrote it) of COVID-19. The rest of his argument remains almost unchanged, demonstrating exactly how prescient the 2005 book was.

Davis wasn't the only one sounding the alarm: 2020 has renewed attention to numerous works over the past three decades that could have warned us of the pandemic threat, by writers as varied as David Quammen, Laurie Garrett, and Richard Horton. But no one beats Davis when it comes to linking seemingly 'natural' disasters to humankind's economic and social decisions, particularly structural inequalities.

Davis identifies a number of contemporary trends that give aid and comfort to emerging viruses. Deforestation and poverty-driven sustenance hunting bring humans and domestic animals into contact with viruses previously isolated in wildlife. Industrial-scale livestock farming practices—especially of poultry and pork—create a sort of hot, smoky, crowded casino floor where these viruses undergo rapid evolution and recombination until they inevitably hit snake eyes, for us, in the form of high virulence and transmissibility to/among humans. The slums in which vast numbers of the urban poor now live create additional opportunities for virus transmission and evolution, with malnutrition and chronic illness making many individuals easy prey. The high cost and limited availability of health care mean that the first few cases are unlikely to receive effective treatment or even recognition from the medical establishment. Finally, the new diseases spread thanks to urban density, rapid global travel, government secrecy, or all of the above.

The account of what happens after that is even more crushing. Switching focus from the earliest victims of pandemics to the people best positioned to stop them, he paints an ugly picture of how political leaders have reacted to emerging viral threats. Countries containing the initial outbreaks have made profound errors, and in some cases used disease as a pretext for repression, xenophobia, and graft (a more thorough explanation of the political situation in China, home to a large number of emerging diseases, would have been useful here but is perhaps beyond the scope of the relatively short book). Meanwhile, countries with less initial exposure and more medical resources

not only failed to offer timely aid but consistently underfunded their own defense efforts. From the vantage point of 2020, it's hard not to grind one's teeth in frustration at Davis's account of how, post 9/11, already scarce resources for the control of infectious disease were redirected to combating largely hypothetical bioterrorism threats in the U.S., or how pharmaceutical companies have been permitted to bottleneck basic health research in favor of flashier, more profitable products.

The most chilling aspect of the book is that this is still an early warning. This current pandemic is not caused by an influenza virus, but the factors that make avian influenza dangerous are all still out there, and the aftermath of COVID-19 may well leave even more people impoverished, malnourished, chronically ill, and vulnerable. Davis proposes few solutions and offers little hope that the governments and global organizations will succeed where they have failed in the past. In the absence of major systemic change, the Monster of the 2005 book may still be preparing its grand entrance.



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