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Agents of Apocalypse, by De Bevoise

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Book Reviews and Notes



Agents of Apocalypse: Epidemic Disease in the Colonial Philippines.
By Ken De Bevoise. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Ken De Bevoise's *Agents of Apocalypse: Epidemic Disease in the Colonial Philippines* is an extremely important book and ought to be widely read by those interested in Philippine Studies. Its subject matter—the complex historical ecology of disease in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Philippines—may well come to inform not only the study of the past but also contemporary Philippine issues. The basic statistics reveal that people were dying on a phenomenal scale: during crisis mortality periods due to diseases in this era, the annual death rate soared from one person in forty to one in twenty-five, and in some years, the death rate even tripled. That newspapers today are filled with details of outbreaks of diseases and high-infant mortality rates suggests that De Bevoise's rich historical presentation may yield significant lessons for contemporary problems.

While some other historians have noted the importance of rinderpest, or the great attention paid by colonial administrators to cholera, no one has studied as many specific diseases and has placed them in the same thick social and epidemiological contexts as De Bevoise. Consequently, this book will be of use to anyone interested in the period because it provides significant studies of venereal disease, smallpox, beriberi, malaria, and cholera. Moreover, it demonstrates that attempts to discuss the Philippines in this period will be incomplete without a serious consideration of the roles of disease and human intervention in the lives of Filipinos, Spaniards, and Americans.

Studies of the history of disease easily lend themselves to what appears to be a dehumanized narrative. Because the central subjects of the story include microbes, the *Anopheles minimus flavirostris* (the most important malaria-carrying mosquito) and various intestinal worms, and because medical literature itself often portrays the human body as an object of dissection, investigation, and analysis, this book could have been more concerned with the diseases themselves than with the people who suffered from them. Despite sentences such as "The steamship's appearance in Philippine waters in the mid-1800s caused a quantum leap in the volume and velocity of contact with internal and external reservoirs of infection" (which is a central reason why archipelago-wide epidemics became possible only in the latter part of the nineteenth century), De Bevoise has avoided the danger of dehumaniza-

tion. Instead, he has interwoven his discussions of etiology with a rich social history of the period, as each of the chapters clearly demonstrate.¹

After an Introduction which describes the "Dimensions of the Crisis" of epidemic diseases in the period, the first two chapters discuss the central model which De Bevoise employs and its dynamics. Two issues, he argues, are crucial: *probability of contact* (factors such as population growth and increased mobility change and how frequently people encounter disease agents) and *susceptibility* (how factors such as poverty, malnutrition, and previous infections combine to make a person more or less likely to contract a disease). To understand the interaction of these requires investigating the period through a consideration of the "total environment." His careful and extensive use of primary and secondary source materials to analyze the total environment is one of the book's outstanding features, and the treatment of each disease benefits enormously from his synthetic skills and his careful integration of etiology with many diverse elements of social history.

Chapters three through seven discuss specific diseases: venereal disease, smallpox, beriberi, malaria, and cholera and the multitude of factors that combined to make these so devastating to the Philippines. In order to understand venereal disease, he discusses prostitution and attempts to regulate it. Similarly, smallpox requires a consideration of why smallpox vaccines, while available in the Philippines since 1805, were not widely effective until the beginning of the twentieth century. This, in turn, requires a history of colonial public-health officials and the many obstacles they encountered due to lack of finances and adequate means of transportation. Understanding the increase in deaths from beriberi entails a specific discussion of which kinds of rice Filipinos of different regions and classes were eating, because beriberi is a non-infectious disease caused by a deficiency in thiamine, something present in unmilled rice but absent from highly milled rice. This problematic of rice consumption and the different foreign and domestic sources for food, in turn, depends on the transformation of Philippine agriculture from subsistence farming to cash-crop production. Epidemics of malaria (which actually killed more people than did cholera during the cholera epidemic of 1902-3) were due, in part, to the movement of people into upland forests as part of the late nineteenth century's attempt to exploit the archipelago's natural resources. Scatology, which has been undertheorized by many scholars, is taken quite seriously by De Bevoise because the history of human waste products is crucial for understanding the spread of cholera. (The frequent presence of sanitation in lists of colonial gifts to the Philippines suggests the need for further studies of scatology.)² In short, De Bevoise's integration of disease with a variety of social and ideological factors has produced careful, compelling studies of specific diseases as well as an important perspective on Philippine history.

Significantly, Michel Foucault's name does not appear in the bibliography. In contrast to other historians of colonial medical practices who follow

Foucault's lead and examine medical regimes from the point of view of human power and control, De Bevoise finds it more useful to follow an epidemiological model from the sciences. Thus, his analysis concentrates less on how a colonial apparatus used the threat of disease to assert its control (and how Filipinos resisted such efforts) and more on how economic, social, and environmental changes in the nineteenth century led to such a dramatic increase in deaths from disease. Certainly, the Spanish *médico titulares* and the American Army's medical personnel appear as significant characters in the drama, but their actions are interpreted from a number of perspectives—scientific, medical, bureaucratic, financial, military—and consequently, they appear as complicated figures acting from a variety of motives.

Finally, a brief exploration of the important theme of laziness may suggest some of the reasons why De Bevoise's work calls for serious attention. Jose Rizal's "The Indolence of the Filipinos" responded to Spanish constructions of Filipino laziness. While he could agree with the Spaniards that Filipinos were not as industrious as they should be, he argued that this was an effect of Spanish rule and not a cause. (The colonial argument, stated most baldly, was that lazy peoples needed industrious rulers for their own benefit.) Forced into servitude, overly-taxed, and denied real opportunities for advancement, the Filipino was bound to be disinclined towards work; personal effort simply brought few or no rewards in the Spanish system. Writing about a century after Rizal (and following him in many respects), Syed Hussein Alatas has demonstrated the importance of colonial descriptions of lazy natives in the formation of colonial ideology.³ For him, indolence is primarily a "myth" developed and perpetrated by the needs of Western rulers.

What both of these writers miss—and what De Bevoise's discussion of the "total environment" and his attention to disease brings out—is that Filipinos of Rizal's era could readily tend towards inactivity (to choose a somewhat neutral term) because of malaria, malnutrition, or any other number of biological factors. De Bevoise's careful attention to bodily realities serves as a reminder that they are just that—realities. Parasites, lack of food, fevers—these and many more affect human behavior profoundly, and attempts to reconstruct past behavior in either cultural or ideological terms without attention to ecological and physiological factors will only be but partial studies. It may not be easy to incorporate these kinds of concerns into the various areas of Philippine Studies, but *Agents of Apocalypse* has demonstrated both the importance of such incorporation and many of the methods by which it can be achieved.

Notes

1. That said, his demographic concern for the *quantity* of life does not lead him to explore questions of the *quality* of life as much as would be possible. While De Bevoise is interested in determining whether people were inoculated effectively,

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Rousseau, following a line of thinking that dates back to Plato, offers a contrasting vignette. In his *Emile*, he deliberately did not inoculate his protagonist in order to declare that life *per se* was not the issue—the real issue is how we live our lives and their duration is only secondary. To take another example, the Apocalypse as imagined in Christian writings is both a quantitative and a qualitative event, a moment combining massive death and cosmological meaning. Of the subjects traditionally related to the quality of life (including religion, politics, and culture), only poverty plays a major role in his presentation. De Bevoise states that he deliberately downplays political issues because they have dominated Philippine historiography and because his narrative subordinates these matters to a different set of problems.

2. For one such attempt, which draws on Michel Foucault's work and emerging trends in the area of Cultural Studies—and which therefore contrasts with De Bevoise's approach (see next paragraph of the review)—see Warwick Anderson's "Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Spring 1995), pp. 640–69.

3. Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

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Poverty and Development: The Call of the Catholic Church in Asia.
Edited by Loreta N. Castro and Arij A. Roest Crollius, S.J. Rome: International Jacques Maritain Institute, 1995. x, 189 pages.

The editors' foreword to this collection says: "This volume contains the proceedings of an international symposium organized by the International Jacques Maritain Institute in collaboration with Miriam College and held in Quezon City, Philippines, from February 22 to 24, 1994. The symposium was part of a wide-ranging program of research into the Bishops' teachings on ethics and economics. The Maritain Institute has been engaged in this research program for some years now, believing that the Bishops are often in the front line of the struggle for justice, and that the Church has now a great interest in promoting ethical values in view of the problem of poverty and development in our time" (ix-x).

In his introductory remarks at the seminar, Fr. Arij Crollius, vice president of the International Jacques Maritain Institute, said that "the philosophical foundation of the Seminar is to create a civilization of Love. In order to accomplish that, three important tasks have to be carried out. They are a widening of the concept of humanism, a purifying of the truth of love, and a deepening of the concept of [the] person" (p. 7).

The proceedings of the seminar are divided into three sections. The first section is devoted to a general introduction and an overview of the key themes and issues raised in the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops (FABC)