



The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History

By J. R. McNeill, William H. McNeill

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Why did the first civilizations emerge when and where they did? How did Islam become a unifying force in the world of its birth? What enabled the West to project its goods and power around the world from the fifteenth century on? Why was agriculture invented seven times and the steam engine just once?

World-historical questions such as these, the subjects of major works by Jared Diamond, David Landes, and others, are now of great moment as global frictions increase. In a spirited and original contribution to this quickening discussion, two renowned historians, father and son, explore the webs that have drawn humans together in patterns of interaction and exchange, cooperation and competition, since earliest times. Whether small or large, loose or dense, these webs have provided the medium for the movement of ideas, goods, power, and money within and across cultures, societies, and nations. From the thin, localized webs that characterized agricultural communities twelve thousand years ago, through the denser, more interactive metropolitan webs that surrounded ancient Sumer, Athens, and Timbuktu, to the electrified global web that today envelops virtually the entire world in a maelstrom of cooperation and competition, J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill show human webs to be a key component of world history and a revealing framework of analysis. Avoiding any determinism, environmental or cultural, the McNeills give us a synthesizing picture of the big patterns of world history in a rich, open-ended, concise account.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The spread of agriculture, the growth of world religions and the rise of European civilization to world dominance are some of the themes explored in this engrossing addition to the distinctive McNeill brand of broad-brush macro-history. The motor of history this time is the growing "web" of interactions-weaving together hunter-gatherer bands, then civilizations and finally the whole world-by which people, goods, diseases and ideas spread. As it binds ever more people ever more tightly, the web both brings them into conflict and lets them share and build on each other's achievements; thus Columbus's extension of the web to the Americas led to conquest but also to the exchange of New World potatoes and maize for Old World horses and smallpox. The father-son historian duo also revisit ideas from William's previous books, discussing the co-evolution of humans and microbes, the uneasy symbiosis between warrior elites and the farmers they protect and exploit, and the social solidarity imparted by group singing and dancing. More ecological than humanistic, the McNeill outlook sees conflict and cooperation as twin outcomes of the struggle for survival that drives developments in technology, political organization, social habits and even religious beliefs. This approach can be reductionist (Europe's vibrant civil society is said to spring from its use of mold-board plows); and as impersonal historical meta-agents go, the trendy "web" conceit is less substantive and fertile than other McNeill brainstormers. Still, this concise and beautifully written synthesis brims with revealing insights that make history comprehensible and enthralling. 25 illus., maps.

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From Library Journal

J.R. and father William, both history professors, unravel the various webs that have connected humans through time.

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Review

A brilliant synthesis of world history...vivid and illuminating. -- *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2003

Exhilarating If you read *The Human Web* you will never again look at a globe in the same way. -- *Fritz Lanham, Houston Chronicle*

[An] irresistably readable work of popular history...with colorful material about everything from...Genghis Khan to...global warming. -- *Los Angeles Times*, 30 April 2003

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