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Cohen, Mark Nathan *Health and the Rise of Civilization*

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formed in colonial North America, this provides a perspective that is both integrated and carefully researched.

Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo

CIVILIZATION VERSUS HEALTH

Cohen, Mark Nathan. *Health and the Rise of Civilization*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989. 285 pp., \$29.95.

Mark Cohen maintains that history is built on images we project on the past and cites as evidence the two conflicting images frequently used to describe the "primitive" and the "civilized." On the one hand there is the romantic concept that admires small societies and simple cultures while on the other there are those who equate civilization with techno-scientific progress and, therefore, have only disdain for the simple, primitive cultures. Scholars who make science and technology synonymous with the idea of progress usually assume that human progress is real and well documented. They also conclude that primitives, who by definition lack scientific sophistication, are less fortunate than the civilized. Adherents to such popular stereotypes typically classify primitive societies as being poor, sickly and malnourished and equate civilization with good health. Mark Cohen rejects such assumptions, not because they are simple, but because they are simplistic.

In his provocative new book, *Health and the Rise of Civilization* Mark Cohen, a professor of anthropology, at the State University of New York, Plattsburgh, challenges the reader to reconsider popularly held conceptions regarding the impact of cultural evolution on human health. While it is true that cultural evolution and technological progress made it possible for societies to alter their ecological habitat, such alterations often had adverse health effects. Based on evidence drawn from the history of infectious diseases, human diet, contemporary hunters-gatherers, and prehistoric skeletons, Cohen argues persuasively that civilization created as many health problems as it prevented or cured. In fact, by way of comparison to civilization, Cohen concludes that the so-called "primitive" has had a surprisingly successful health record.

From the standpoint of content and methodology, Cohen's text is an excellent primer for anyone interested in comparative civilizational studies. Moving from prehistory to the present Cohen draws upon a variety of disciplines to test commonly held theories regarding civil and pre-civil societies. The result is a masterful amalgamation of relevant factual detail into a very readable text, covering an expansive period of time. While the text consists of only seven, brief chapters, it is not the work of a generalizer. It is a volume designed to appeal to the specialist, as well as an educated lay public, and the author successfully maintains throughout a commendable balance between the scholarly and the popular. Chapters 1-3 provide the novice with an excellent overview of

some of the major problems associated with cultural evolution while at the same time providing the necessary background for the more substantive material contained in chapters 4-7. The scholastic demands of the specialist are met through the use of extensive endnotes and an impressive bibliography which together compose nearly half the book.

In a brief summary of the textual content, Chapter 1, "Images of the Primitive and Civilized," discusses various stereotypes that impede the understanding of cultural evolution and concludes that progress, at least from the standpoint of health, has come at a very high price. For the novice this chapter is especially important as it introduces the theories of such paragons of civilizational studies as Lewis Henry Morgan, Leslie White, Julian Steward, V. Gordon Childe, Ester Boserup, and Marshall Sahlins.

Chapter 2 "Behavior and Health" addresses more specifically the role of human activity in promoting disease by examining infectious diseases, malnutrition, and degenerative diseases. The author's objective is to demonstrate that ". . . most threats to health do not occur randomly, nor are they dictated solely by natural forces: most are correlated with patterns of human activity." For example, degenerative diseases such as arthritis, cancer, and heart disease, are not the universal result of "growing old," but rather can be related to individual behavior.

In Chapter 3, "The Evolution of Human Society," Cohen interrupts his investigation of the changing patterns of health to provide a brief sketch of how human societies have developed. In this portion the author provides an excellent summation, albeit simplified, of the many issues involved in the progress of civilization. Covered are such topics as the classification of societies by size; social, political, and economic adjustments to changing population; the origins of agriculture; and the structure of early civilization.

Chapter 4, "The History of Infectious Disease," and Chapter 5, "Changes in Human Diet" turn from breadth to depth as Cohen draws upon contemporary epidemiology and the nutritional sciences to explain how changes in human behavior impact upon human health. As humankind progressed from nomadism to sedentism it encountered an increasing number of infectious diseases and, likewise, diet became less nutritious. As human society grew in numbers, parasites spread more readily. Large populations made possible the survival and transmission of certain diseases that could not survive in the less populated and mobile prehistoric societies. A good and well-documented example is measles. Scholars speculate that measles originated from a virus found in domesticated animals, probably dogs or cows, and that its spread is related to an increase in population density and growing trade networks. If the new virus had appeared among hunter-gatherers, or even among small farming villages, it probably would have disappeared immediately due to the lack of hosts. Measles is in effect a disease of civilization.

Cohen devotes chapter 6 to an investigation of "Health Among Con-

temporary Hunter-gatherers" whereby he compiles additional evidence in support of his thesis that civilization brought with it a decline in health standards. Concentrating on the !Kung San of the Kalahari and the Hadza of Tanzania, Cohen argues that these wandering bush people enjoy relatively disease-free existence. Based on the evidence garnered from contemporary food gatherers Cohen states that it is reasonable to believe that prehistoric hunter-gatherers, living in choice environments and with increased game supplies, would have fared even better than their modern counterparts.

The author acknowledges the danger in comparing contemporary hunter-gatherers with earlier groups, due to their unique environments, but the "Evidence of Prehistoric Skeletons," presented in Chapter 7, provides strong support for his health claims regarding primitives. Based upon data derived from a scientific study of prehistoric skeletons, Cohen concludes that prehistoric food gatherers enjoyed a richer diet and were better nourished than most subsequent populations. In fact, the caloric intake of even the poorest of contemporary and prehistoric hunter-gatherers compares favorably with the national averages of many major countries of the Third World today.

Mark Cohen's *Health and the Rise of Civilization* is in some respects written in the tradition of Lewis Mumford's *The Transformations of Man*. Both challenge existing myths regarding the benefits of civilization and call for a realignment of fact and fantasy. While some readers may question Cohen's thesis and criticize the brevity of his text, none can deny its scholarship nor accuse Cohen of offering simple theories on complex issues. The volume is concise, but learned; opinionated, but extensively documented. It would be an extremely valuable addition to any required reading list in introductory courses on comparative civilization.

Wayne M. Bledsoe

Errata

William Eckhart's "A Dialectical Evolutionary Theory of Civilizations, Empires, and Wars" in *Comparative Civilizations Review* Fall 1991, n. 25, pages 54-78.

Table 1 (p. 57). Change the Sum of India from "167" to "176."

Table 3 (p. 64). Change "900-200AD" under War Casualties to "900-2000AD" and move one column to the right under Dates.

Change all "%" to "***" in last column.

Change all "%" to "***" in the Notes.

Change "Hohn" to "Kohn" under Authors.

Table 4 (p. 67). Change Grand Total of "765" to "597" for the 18th century.

Insert 19th century data (which has been omitted):

19 134 31 19 44 34 42 115 419 285 32% 765

Table 5 (p. 70). Notes, 5th line: Change "300 BC" to "3000 BC."