

The 'Africa syndrome'

by Paul Gallagher

The Hot Zone

by Richard Preston
Random House, New York, 1994
300 pages, hardbound, \$23

The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance

by Laurie Garrett
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1994
750 pages, hardbound, \$25

These two books—one intensely sensationalized and already made into a movie, the other its scholarly alter ego—share all the axioms of the global “environmentalist” movement centered around the British aristocracy’s “Club of the Isles” and World Wide Fund for Nature. Both authors acknowledge the significant influence of Conservation International; author Preston praises Russell Mittermeier of Conservation International for “originating the interesting comparison between the human species and a pile of meat waiting to be consumed.”

That view of mankind will serve to represent the axioms I refer to; the extreme hostility to science and to mankind’s part in God’s Creation. Britain’s Prince Philip, the head of the World Wide Fund for Nature, who says he prays for reincarnation as a deadly virus to wipe out human populations, is in effect the intellectual author of both books.

The difference between these books is that one—*The Hot Zone*—also shares the *tactics* of the major ecology and “environmentalist” organizations: complete disregard for scientific truth and wild sensationalism for the purpose of trying to impose global economic policies.

Richard Benedick, the State Department official who negotiated the Montreal Protocol to ban CFCs, put the anti-scientific principle this way, in his own book *Ozone Diplomacy*: “The Montreal Protocol on Substances That Deplete the Ozone Layer mandated significant reductions in the use of several extremely useful chemicals. . . . The protocol did not

simply prescribe limits on these chemicals based on ‘best available technology,’ which had been a traditional way of reconciling environmental goals with economic interests. . . . At the time of the negotiations and signing [in 1987], no measurable evidence of damage existed.” Similarly, in 1992, Donella and Dennis Meadows, two of the authors of the original fraudulent *Limits to Growth* study, boasted in their 20th anniversary retrospective, *Beyond the Limits*: “The world’s nations . . . soberly, reluctantly . . . agreed to give up a profitable and useful industrial product [CFCs]. They did it before there was any measurable economic, ecological, or human damage, and before there was complete scientific certainty.”

Laurie Garrett’s book, by contrast, presents a great deal of useful information about the recent years’ proliferation of new infectious diseases and the return of others once virtually eliminated by public health measures. She frequently presents evidence that it is not the presence of “super-deadly viruses and bacteria” that threatens mankind, but the absence or breakdown of nations’ public health infrastructures and populations’ immune systems. Thus, her book is far more interesting, but she never entertains this conclusion herself, though it is obvious from the evidence of epidemics and pandemics of the past 30 years.

Predictably, Preston’s book of sensational falsifications of, and attacks on, medical science, is now coming out as a movie. In it, Morgan Freeman and Dustin Hoffman are apparently carrying vials of “100% fatal virus”—which, in the end, can’t even make anyone sick! The Hollywood mafia, and probably the box office stars, support the wild assertions of Prince Philip’s environmentalists.

Racist, and not so hot

Preston’s book is based on a big media story of 1989, in which a shipment of monkeys from the Philippines, intended for medical research by Hazelton Corp., and being caged in a building in Reston, Virginia outside Washington, all died from a strain of Ebola virus present in one or more of them when caught in the Philippines. An Ebola epidemic, 20 years earlier in Zaire, had killed several hundred people before the Zairean government and Army stopped it with a strict quarantine of the region. A smaller 1960s epidemic of a similar filovirus (“thread-like virus”) contracted in Zaire, had

killed seven people in Marburg, Germany. These viruses were highly lethal, but the Reston monkey virus, which was ultimately proven to have infected the blood of several Hazelton employees, when all was said and done, did not make anyone sick.

Preston ignores the implications of this fact, and resists the evidence that several American doctors survived infection with the Ebola virus which was so fatal to Zaireans, and a similar one in Bolivia; presumably because their living standard was far higher and their immune systems far stronger. His “medical views” are simply adopted, as he freely admits, from Russell Mittermeier and from Joshua Lederberg of Rockefeller University. These “medical views” may not be stated as such in the movie, so here they are:

“In a sense, the Earth is mounting an immune response against the human species. It is beginning to react to the human parasite, the flooding infection of people, the cancerous rot-outs in Europe, Japan and the U.S., thick with replicating primates. . . . Perhaps AIDS is the first step in a natural process of clearance. . . .

“The emergence of AIDS, Ebola, and any number of other rainforest agents appears to be a natural consequence of the ruin of the tropical biosphere.”

So the real subject of *The Hot Zone* is AIDS, about which the author clearly knows nothing at all except his ideological belief. This racist belief is that AIDS is a “tropical rainforest agent” of Africa threatening to destroy “us” because of our overprocreation. Is Preston combining the popular prejudices of American homosexuals and others: about “AIDS from Africa” ravaging “our community,” and against Catholic views of population growth and the sacredness of each human life? The book’s final chapter offers only a possible hint in this direction. It is clear, however, from the last few chapters that Preston, whose family lived in Zaire during the 1950s “Winds of Change” period, resents the expansion of Zairean farm populations into forest regions, the end of the era of big game hunters, and all that.

From this prejudice, Preston bitterly attacks the developing of economic infrastructure in Africa. “The paving of the Kinshasa Highway affected every person on Earth, and turned out to be one of the most important events of the 20th century. It has already cost at least 10 million lives. . . . In effect, I had witnessed the crucial event in the emergence of AIDS, the transformation of a thread of dirt into a ribbon of tar.” Most of the Kinshasa Highway was paved in the 1970s, and it is the *only* transcontinental highway in Africa. According to Preston, this allowed African truck-drivers to spread the AIDS virus, which had somehow popped out of the rainforest monkey populations, and caused the entire global AIDS pandemic. That the earliest known AIDS cases were in the United States and Europe, does not faze such wild hostility to Africans and their economic development.

On the movie screen, perhaps the producers of this book hope to replicate “The China Syndrome” as “The Africa

Syndrome” for manipulating the fears and scapegoating tendencies of Americans.

The simple fact that white American victims of AIDS typically survive 8-10 years after infection with the HIV virus, while African victims die in two years and American minorities’ AIDS victims somewhere in between, is representative of the *type* of fact which Preston instinctively wishes to ignore. This is true whether he is dealing with AIDS or with “hot viruses” (i.e., hemorrhagic virus diseases which break down the circulatory system and cause disastrous general internal bleeding, and which kill many people in parts of the Third World). Another such *type* of fact is that malaria and diarrheal diseases kill vastly more—hundreds of millions, particularly children—because the public health means to stop them are either not provided, for reasons of economic policy, or withdrawn (DDT) for reasons of environmentalist dogma and pressure.

As for the broader scientific questions of the reasons for the emergence and spread of new infectious diseases, Preston’s book is pure ideology. It is captured, ironically, in his own preface: “Any scientific follies committed in this book are mine alone.”

Thorough, but not correct

Laurie Garrett’s book involves a more serious attempt to deal with a deadly serious question. Epidemics of new



In 1985, when this photograph was taken, Niger had an ambitious program to immunize all infants and children against the most deadly childhood diseases. Here infants and mothers are being inoculated with the BCG vaccine against tuberculosis. Today, global economic policies have taken down such public health measures; these, not “overpopulation in Africa,” are causing the resurgence of once-conquered diseases and emergence of new, high-mortality strains.

infectious diseases, and old infectious diseases revived with new virulence, are sweeping through Third World nations and appearing in the "formerly industrialized nations." Public health infrastructure is breaking down; health care delivery systems, per capita, are below the standards of 30 years ago; vaccination levels have fallen disastrously, not to mention nutrition. Average life-spans have stopped increasing and in some nations and population groups are falling. There are epidemics and pandemics of new and more virulent strains of cholera, malaria, dengue fevers, hepatitis, meningitis, and a recent epidemic of bubonic and pneumonic plague in India. Ebola in Zaire is hardly the primary problem. With the AIDS pandemic, public health measures have been abandoned entirely, by World Health Organization policy.

But while Garrett provides information on all of this, she also writes to blame it all on medical science, and on man's dominion over nature.

Garrett makes clear in her introduction that the source of her book is the very same May 1989 conference convened by Rockefeller University under the direction of its President Joshua Lederberg, which also launched *The Hot Zone*. The conference's purpose was to show "that the disease-causing microbes of the planet, far from having been defeated, were posing ever-greater threats to humanity," says Garrett. Its clear assumption was that measures of public health taken by governments were a discredited strategy of the past against infectious disease. Such traditional protection of public health—historically one of the prime and sacred functions of government—was now ineffective against rampaging microbes, and the new wave was to be the heroics of "disease cowboys" trained by major infectious disease institutes to roam the world isolating new infectious agents and modes of their transmission.

Perhaps *Washington Post* reporters attended this conference, held across the street from the White House. It was only a few months later that the "monkey house" scare, in nearby Reston, Virginia, was spread by the *Post*, giving Preston the horror movie lead for his book; that scare has recently been re-run in numerous TV-magazine segments as promotion for "The Africa Syndrome."

If the heroics of medical specialists in fighting disease are separated from rigorous public health measures because those measures are not carried out, then a pathologically pessimistic policy remains, as in the case of the handling of the AIDS pandemic. Under such a policy, TB would never have been contained, or even slowed; and under such policies, diseases like TB return in force.

Garrett has chapters covering a wide range of serious and deadly diseases ravaging mainly Third World countries, with increasing mortality rates, as public health infrastructure weakens and living standards fall. But she wishes to deny that these reasons are involved, and to ascribe the deterioration not to public health policies but to overpopulation.

One of her more detailed, but fundamentally dishonest

sections deals with the attempt to eradicate malaria. It contains this paragraph: "*Anopheles* mosquito populations could vary drastically depending on rainfall, agricultural practices, the nature of human housing and communities, altitude, proximity to forests or jungles, economic development, the nutritional status of the local people, and numerous other factors that could affect mosquito breeding sites." She omits to mention the true, crucial factors: the progressive ban on draining of swamp areas and the use of insecticides, since the 1970s, because of environmentalist, malthusian policies. Malaria was well on the road to global eradication when DDT was banned for political reasons by Environmental Protection Agency Administrator William Ruckelshaus in 1972, and then resurged, killing many millions yearly.

Garrett otherwise continually puts population growth forward as the cause of disease spread, though not with Preston's obscene fury quoted above. In her chapter "Nature and *Homo Sapiens*," she tries to show that the growth and spread of human populations has "liberated" microbes previously locked in "remote ecospheres" (a new term for "darkest Africa"?), and that airline travel has been a particular culprit in spreading disease. In the same chapter, she presents U.N. population density statistics for various nations which are grossly inaccurate, claiming that the population density of China, for example, increased by 8.5% in two years over 1990-92. Nowhere does Garrett confront the most basic fact concerning the new epidemics of the past 20 years: that in the world's most populous nations with the most developed public health care policies and health care systems—in particular, in Europe—these epidemics have not occurred; but they have swept through Third World nations as their economic infrastructure was torn up by indebtedness and International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditionalities. The 1993 cholera epidemic spreading from Peru to other Ibero-American nations is one crystal clear example, caused by Peru's elimination of sanitation funding, in order to meet debt payments on IMF demand.

This ideological character of Garrett's book tends to "bury" otherwise useful discussions and information on the evolution of new viruses, and the ways that infection by several viruses at once can lead to new strains of diseases, in part by the lowered immune response itself. Garrett has interviewed and read the work of many infectious disease specialists and "disease cowboys." Unlike Preston, who is obsessed with their personal histories, their personal anxieties, and the Nietzschean character he wishes to give these "heroes," Garrett has attempted to find out what they know and report it. Unfortunately, some of these infectious disease specialists themselves exhibit extreme cultural pessimism and malthusian prejudices, which verge on identifying with the diseases, rather than the human beings who could be saved from them. It is the brand of being trained by and working in the orbit of world health institutes with explicitly malthusian, environmentalist policies.