**Disease in the Greater Caribbean and America’s Tropical Empire: How Peripheral Disease Shapes the Metropole**

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**Abstract:** This essay argues that, in addition to economic, social, and political factors, ecological transformations must be appreciated for explaining the historical trajectory of empires. I explain how disease in the colonial periphery of the Greater Caribbean worked to not only dictate geopolitical competition between empires, but also shape strategies of domination. Critical to this, I argue, is the role of differential immunity to tropical diseases.

Historical explanations of events often focus on social, political, and economic factors and at times fail to appreciate the ecological forces that shape history. Recently, historians have typically studied ecology and diseases in empires as a weapon or tool for conquest. From the antiquity to the Spaniards in the New World, disease has played a key role in the rise and fall of empires. However, an often-overlooked dynamic is how disease and ecology in the periphery shaped imperial strategy. This paper focuses on how disease in the colonial periphery of the Greater Caribbean[[1]](#footnote-1) worked to not only dictate geopolitical competition between empires, but also shape strategies of domination. I argue that disease in the Great Caribbean dictated imperial conquest and helps explain the imperial trajectory of the late-coming American empire. I develop this ecological explanation by first exploring the history of colonialism and empire-building in the Greater Caribbean, and how the Spanish empire was posed to dominate the region for centuries. Then I turn to the United States and its imperial strategy, using Cuba as an example to explore how disease shaped American dominance after the 1900s. Critical to this, I argue, is the role of differential immunity to tropical diseases.

It is hard to stress just how important the ecology of the Americas was during the race for imperial holdings in the region. As John McNeil succinctly states, "it is perhaps a rude blow to the *amour propre* of our species to think that lowly mosquitoes and mindless viruses can shape our international affairs. But they can."[[2]](#footnote-2) The economic and colonial history of the Americas traces in line with disease, and often reenforce themselves. It is well documented just how important disease was during the European conquest of the Americas. The earliest empires with footholds in the New World -- Portugal and Spain -- initially focused on resource extraction, primarily gold and silver. However, overtime, sugar plantation economies began to emerge across the Americas, requiring large ecological transformations -- for instance, deforestation and soil erosion. These plantations simultaneously created a demand for labor and a favorable environment for disease; the Atlantic African slave trade, which met the demand for labor, also carried A. *aegypti* mosquitoes. These A. *aegypti* mosquitoes, carrying the yellow fever virus, flourished in an incredibly viable breeding ground of the Caribbean.[[3]](#footnote-3) This early introduction of yellow fever and the mosquitoes that carried it across the Atlantic in the 15th and 16th century[[4]](#footnote-4) helps explain why disease played such a significant role in imperial competition.

McNeil, tracing the history of American ecology, argues that differential immunity to yellow fever and malaria, both diseases spread by the A. *aegypti* mosquitoes, gave people who were already resident in the New World an advantage over new arrivals.[[5]](#footnote-5) In other words, there was a *homefield advantage* in the Americas and Caribbean due to an early development of immunity. This benefited the early Spaniards and helps explain why the Spanish colonial regime in the New World was durable and able to resist the stronger empires of Britain and France in the region into the 18th century. This ecological advantage helped shape colonial competition just as much as economic might or naval superiority. This effect is best illustrated in McNeill’s account of British attempts to compete with Spanish *homefield advantage*:

In 1727, the British Vice-Admiral Francis Hosier sailed with a naval squadron to the shores of what is now Colombia and Panama. His superiors had instructed him to blockade this coast in hopes of preventing a Spanish treasure fleet laden with South American silver from reaching Spain. Yellow fever broke out on Hosier’s ships while they were cruising off Portobelo, killing almost the entire crew. Hosier soon scraped together another crew form Jamaica and returned to his duty, whereupon yellow fever killed the second crew along with the Vice-Admiral. Some 4,000 sailors died without a shot fired. Fourteen years later, Admiral Edward Vernon brought an amphibious strike force of about 29,000 men to the Colombia coast to besiege the Spanish stronghold of Cartagena. Within a few months 22,000 were dead, almost all from diseases, mainly yellow fever but probably malaria as well. The population of the Spanish colonies remained unaffected, and Spain’s grip on its American empire remained firm.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This story stresses a crucial point – that even the strongest and most capable European rival, due to its alienness and lack of immunity, had trouble overcoming the ecological *homefield advantage*. This concept and argument can be expanded to explain American imperial trajectory in the Greater Caribbean, and the American empire’s ecological strategy in its colonial holdings into the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

As so-called newcomers to the international scene, having gained independence in just 1776, the United States were far from capable of competing in European colonial competition of the Greater Caribbean. In fact, the United States would not have a foothold in the Caribbean and the Pacific until the 1890s, with colonial territories in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawai’i, Guam, American Samoa, Panama, and occupational Cuba.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, this is not to say the United States did not share the same experience as Britain in its struggle against yellow fever. Rather, the United States mainland, since even its war for independence, struggled with crippling yellow fever outbreaks across the country. The most prominent and well documented episode of yellow fever outbreak was in the nation’s then most cosmopolitan city and political capitol, Philadelphia in 1793. In correspondence with David Humphreys, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson describes the outbreak, stating, “It is called a yellow fever, but is like nothing known or read of by the Physicians. The week before last the deaths were about 40. The last week about 80. And this week I think they will be 200, and it goes on spreading.”[[8]](#footnote-8) By the end of the outbreak, nearly 5,000 people were dead.[[9]](#footnote-9) These epidemics occurred across the US mainland in countless cities. The United States, unlike the Spanish empire in the New World, had no *homefield advantage* with preferential immunity, developed from years of exposure and experience with the virus.

Incidentally, the rise of British, American, and French colonial holdings and the fall of Spanish colonial dominance in the Greater Caribbean did not take form until centuries later, as differential immunity began to wane. In this sense, it can be argued that shifts in ecological factors were critical to the rise of the American empire in the Greater Caribbean and Pacific, or as Immerwahr defines, the Greater United States.[[10]](#footnote-10) While it is important to note that the United States was a latecomer to imperialism and required time to accumulate capital and military strength to compete with global powers, the American empire also required time to develop immunity and medical knowledge required to maintain and compete for a *tropical* empire. However, the role of yellow fever and disease did not stop during the subsequent colonial expansion of the Greater Caribbean, and in fact helped shape the strategy of colonial rule for the American empire – a strategy based on eradicating disease and modernization.

While Cuba was not an official territory or colony, US military authorities legitimated the occupation of Cuba from 1898 to 1902 based on the US-Cuban public health work to eradicate yellow fever.[[11]](#footnote-11) In the beginning of the occupation, the US military government in partnership with Cuban physicians embarked on an aggressive sanitation campaign to control yellow fever. While this might have been a genuine public health effort to eradicate yellow fever from the region, it was nonetheless vital in developing an imperial strategy. Public works and US military government occupation were able to construct an absolute opposition between the colonial rule of Spain and the United States within Cuba. ”With nearly ritualized insistence,” Bouhassira states, ”emblems of the Spanish colonial past were dismantled or refurbished to highlight new, modern functions brought by the US occupation”[[12]](#footnote-12), introducing electric trains to substitute horse cars and replacing the *Academia de Ciencias Medicas, Fisicas, y Naturales* with the University of Havana.[[13]](#footnote-13) These efforts to rid Cuba of any Spanish colonial legacies was key in establishing regional hegemony in the Greater Caribbean. With centuries of Spanish control in the region, dismantling these long-lasting legacies and connections to the Spanish metropole would prove important to US foreign and imperial policy. This was done through modernization – removing old institutions, traditions, and technologies – and successfully eradicating yellow fever from the region. Of course, Cuban occupation was just one example of this process, but across the Greater Caribbean, these efforts to promote public health, and in extension, remove previous colonial legacies via modernization helped the American empire consolidate regional hegemony.

In addition to dismantling colonial ties, the US’s efforts to remove disease from the region also took on an economic strategy. For countries between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, the triumph over diseases mapped a “new geography of inhabitable territory and commercial opportunity.”[[14]](#footnote-14) If the US were to enter these colonial commercial markets – Puerto Rico, Caribbean Islands, the Panama Canal – there would have to be assurance that the new foreigners, in this case, American military and economic investors, were safe from disease. Thus, critical to the American imperial strategy was eradicating disease from these territories to have ’boots on the ground’ – whether it be in the form of military force, economic venture, or inhabitation. The strategy worked from metropole to periphery, but also vice versa; the eradication of disease allowed for immigration from the Great Caribbean to the American mainland, which was especially important given the abolition of slave labor after the American Civil War.

To conclude, this paper argued that disease played an often-overlooked importance in shaping the American empire’s trajectory in the Greater Caribbean. With a *homefield advantage* of differential immunity to yellow fever, the Spanish empire was able to resist European and US colonial contestation. However, as the *homefield advantage* waned in the next century and the US was able to accumulate capital, military capabilities, and immunity, the late-coming empire was able to consolidate regional power by eradicating tropical disease in the Caribbean as part of an imperial strategy to remove previous colonial legacies and allow for occupation and immigration. This strategy was explored using the example of Cuban occupation and illustrated how ecological factors impacted American imperial aspirations. Yellow fever and disease first worked to *inhibit* American imperial influence in the region, and later worked to *consolidate* influence in the Greater Caribbean. Finally, in addition to economic, social, and political factors, ecological transformations must be appreciated for explaining the historical trajectory of empires.

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2. McNeil, John Robert, Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010: 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. McNeil, John Robert. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Burbank, Jane and Frederick Cooper. “Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference” New Jersey: Princeton University Press (2010): 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. McNeill, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Immerwahr, Daniel. “How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States” London: Vintage (2019): 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Thomas Jefferson to David Humphreys*. -09-11, 1793. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mtjbib008002/. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Powell, J. Bring Out Your Dead, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia (2014): ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Immerwahr, D. How to Hide an Empire, (2019): 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bouhassira, Eric E. Beyond Yellow Fever Eradication Nation and Racial Gatekeeping in Cuba in Jose Amador, Medicine and Nation Building in the Americas, 1890-1940. Vanderbilt University Press. (2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bouhassira, Eric E. Beyond Yellow Fever Eradication Nation and Racial Gatekeeping in Cuba, (2015): 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid*, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Showalter, J. W. ”Redeeming the Tropics,” National Geographic Magazine 25:3 (1914): 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)