

EAST, WEST, EVERYWHERE: THE GREAT WARMING

Brian Fagan's The Great Warming: Climate Change and the Rise and Fall of Civilizations (1) has reached the market during a time of intense interest in the effects of global warming on human societies. (1) Here, however, the reader will encounter a plentiful attention to the European landscape. In focus as well is a specific historical era, the Medieval Warm Period, which lasted from ca. AD 800 to 1300. The author draws on a variety of both ancient and modern sources to reconstruct our knowledge of a warming trend of a few temperatures that characterized that age, including northern ice cores, tree ring dating, and meticulous calculations that feature archival materials on annual wine and other harvests.

The regularity of the daily toil of the agrarian precursors of the European Renaissance is slowly transformed by the onset of more welcome warmer weather patterns. Not everywhere apparent, a shift in seasonal agricultural cycles occurs nevertheless, allowing longer planting and harvest seasons, the production of surpluses, population growth, and a rise in the expansion of urban and inter-urban trade networks. Warmer sea temperatures bring relative wealth to coastal European fishing communities, the growth of ship building, and the ability of the Norse, in particular, to venture across larger stretches of ocean to Greenland and the New World where Europe's first hesitant cross-cultural encounters with indigenous inhabitants occurred.

A less fortuitous association with The Great Warming was the impact of the gradual disappearance of healthy pastureland among Mongolian nomadic societies, and their deadly westward patterns of imperial conquest that ranged from Asian steppe to the shores of the Danube in search of an environmental continuity to what might have been remained a more peaceful if not isolated way of life. Desertification along the Sahel negatively affected once thriving pastoral populations for miles around while reduced and unpredictable rainfall compellingly contributed to the fragmentation and ultimate scattering of the populations of once mighty Mayan city-states.

The author avoids drawing a direct causal link between warming patterns and the transformation of human and animal habitats. Rather, he likens the effects of climate change to those involving the indirect action of throwing a rock in a pond and watching the cascade of ripples that follow until they reach the shore. As a result, supporters, skeptics, and observers alike, may find ample room for maneuver to add to contemporary discussions on climate change. Some demographers have suggested that the critical transition from a combination of hunting, gathering, and horticulture, to sustainable agriculture, the production of surpluses, and the advent of urban life in ancient societies, was preceded, not followed, by a rise in population itself.

Similarly, it could be argued that warming trends in Europe contributed to those voyages that eventually resulted in infected rats and their flea vector bringing the devastation of bubonic plague to the trading city of Venice and additional European ports only 50 years after the Great Warming ended. Yet a loss of over one-quarter of Europe's population between 1347- 1351, the more equitable redistribution of land that followed, essential changes in social status hierarchies, and the questioning of spiritual ascendancies over both nature and the human condition that accompanied the intellectual and artistic creativity of the Enlightenment, might be of such grand direct or indirect causal scope as to be difficult to include in the author's pond paradigm. So, too, are the problems of analyzing overlaps between the appearance of a distinctly human social organizational invention, that of the joint stock corporation, which limited risk and liability of merchants and ship owners that accompanied the eastern expansion of northern European trading companies fully three centuries after the end of the Great Warming period, and only 50 years after the start of the Little Ice Age, an era of cooler weather that appears to have begun in 1550.

The value of this work is that it reviews a time when climate change was a relatively pristine concept. Like the slow deforestation of Europe that had accompanied the extension of agriculture over a period of at least a millennium before the Great Warming, the consequences of climate change were neither seen as being an integral part of human social, economic, or political activity, that then went on to contribute a series of consequences to future ways of life. Nor were these consequences capable of being compensated for in advance. In addition to humanitarian aid planning in the face of contemporary natural disasters, the Great Warming offers support for Europe's consensus on new targets for the reduction of greenhouse gases over the next few decades. However, given this book's lengthy historical referent, an essential justification for a continuing assessment of the computer modeler's template of measuring and projecting the effects of climate change over a century and beyond is also provided.

(1) New York, Bloomsbury Press (2008)