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Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches On Influenza, Agribusiness, And The Nature Of Science



Synopsis

Thanks to breakthroughs in production and food science, agribusiness has been able to devise new ways to grow more food and get it more places more quickly. There is no shortage of news items on hundreds of thousands of hybrid poultry — each animal genetically identical to the next — packed together in megabarns, grown out in a matter of months, then slaughtered, processed and shipped to the other side of the globe. Less well known are the deadly pathogens mutating in, and emerging out of, these specialized agro-environments. In fact, many of the most dangerous new diseases in humans can be traced back to such food systems, among them *Campylobacter*, *Nipah* virus, Q fever, hepatitis E, and a variety of novel influenza variants.

Agribusiness has known for decades that packing thousands of birds or livestock together results in a monoculture that selects for such disease. But market economics doesn't punish the companies for growing Big Flu — it punishes animals, the environment, consumers, and contract farmers. Alongside growing profits, diseases are permitted to emerge, evolve, and spread with little check.

"That is," writes evolutionary biologist Rob Wallace, "it pays to produce a pathogen that could kill a billion people."

In *Big Farms Make Big Flu*, a collection of dispatches by turns harrowing and thought-provoking, Wallace tracks the ways influenza and other pathogens emerge from an agriculture controlled by multinational corporations. Wallace details, with a precise and radical wit, the latest in the science of agricultural epidemiology, while at the same time juxtaposing ghastly phenomena such as attempts at producing featherless chickens, microbial time travel, and neoliberal Ebola. Wallace also offers sensible alternatives to lethal agribusiness. Some, such as farming cooperatives, integrated pathogen management, and mixed crop-livestock systems, are already in practice off the agribusiness grid.

While many books cover facets of food or outbreaks, Wallace's collection appears the first to explore infectious disease, agriculture, economics and the nature of science together. *Big Farms Make Big Flu* integrates the political economies of disease and science to derive a new understanding of the evolution of infections. Highly capitalized agriculture may be farming pathogens as much as chickens or corn.

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Customer Reviews

Rob Wallace received a Ph.D. in biology at the CUNY Graduate Center, and did post-doctorate work at the University of California, Irvine, with Walter Fitch, a founder of molecular phylogeny. He lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he is both a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Global Studies, University of Minnesota and a deli clerk at a local sandwich shop.Â

The book is a very important contribution to the ongoing debate on the poultry industry. It gives a refreshing perspective on the problem. Some of the parts are a little shallow in the details of political economy. However, the author primarily is not a political economist! Overall the insights are very useful! Must read!

Starting with a detailed account of influenza, Wallace articulates why there should be no surprise on diseases popping around new places where standard recipes for wealth growth are introduced (perhaps, more accurately, imposed). By framing the question large enough, this book offers a unique perspective to think about the structural issues that shape our increasing ability to render our pathogens invincible. And every here and there, insights about the ideology driving and re-inforcing the structure raising our pathogens make the book an enjoyable read, I would personally highlight the reflection on black swans, illustrating how stochastic and deterministic are part of the same. Also, worth of mention is the historical analysis on labor abuse and the strong similarities between slavery in the 19th century and current practices for contract farming. All in all, this book should not be missed by any disease ecologist or epidemiologist.

The research is excellent, but the book is dry to read. He makes a strong case against factory farming if we are to prevent a pandemic flu outbreak. I don't think his solutions to factory farming are strong enough as he doesn't address the real problem which is we need to stop eating animals to prevent diseases that they promote.

Wallace may be the most pretentious author I have ever read. Make sure you don't skip over the 14 pages of Introduction where the author builds his credibility. He does admit to being professionally ostracized, so at least he warns you to approach this book with skepticism. He would also like you to know that he is a reader of Herodotus, Montaigne, and Melle Mel. That being said, this book is a collection of easily obtainable facts encapsulated by layers of confabulation and bias. I think this book was written much the same way Michael Crichton turned fossilized DNA into living dinosaurs in the novel Jurassic Park. Wallace like Crichton started with a backbone of old parts that he mined out of the internet like blood from amber. He then filled in the missing parts with bias that he found festering in the most primitive parts of his brain... and behold.. this literary tyrannosaur that you should start running from NOW.

Really interesting compilation of essays that make the explicit connection between capitalism, ecological changes, and infectious disease risk. Presents promising new "circuits of capital" framework for studying connections between capital and health and quantitatively testing Krieger's ecosocial theory.

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