I
n six modern plagues, veterinarian and journalist Mark Jerome Walters, like many modern-day greens, deems humankind the source of many of the world’s problems. He claims that because of humanity’s attempts to promote such alleged evils as “efficiency and profit,” “the financial gain of the few,” and “progress,” we are now suffering from diseases on an unprecedented scale. Modern technologies and free trade are supposedly responsible for six plagues (and probably many more), including mad cow disease, drug resistant and food-borne illnesses, Lyme disease, the West Nile Virus, and SARS.

Walters is right to note the extent that humans have done to actively control disease. In his view, diseases were reduced during the twentieth century because we reached an “equilibrium” in which “societies developed immunity” and because “essenticalities had merely adjusted their ways of life to control them.” But because of humankind’s greed, those gains were limited and temporary, and we have recently entered a new age of great ecological destruction. “So closely are many epidemics linked to ecological change that they might rightfully be called ecodemics.” Walters contends.

He is right that human actions, particularly human interactions, spread disease. In the 2001 book Mosquito, Harvard’s infectious disease expert Andrew Spielman and co-author Michael D’Antonio detail the ravages of infectious diseases that have occurred throughout history as humankind expanded trade and engaged in military conflict. Unlike Walters, those authors also describe the commendable efforts of individuals who labored to discover the causes of the sicknesses and develop cures. They understand the mistakes and challenges presented by commerce, but they also recognize the realities of this world: We cannot quarantine nations. Instead, Spielman and D’Antonio provide some valuable, practical advice for control methods in the modern world.

In stark contrast, Walters focuses on condemning human action (home building, trade, hunting, etc.) and technologies while offering a false solution. His cure prescribes preservation of what he calls “ecosystems,” “greater social equity,” and “protecting and restoring ecological wholeness upon which our health depends.” He never fully explains what this romantic vision involves, but this “solution” would require dramatic changes—demanding that we transition to a world of small, isolated communities with little trade and far fewer people. In addition, he appears ready to dispense with certain technologies such as the use of antibiotics in farm animals.

Walters not only ignores the fact that his solution is unsustainable, he also ignores the fact that the creation and technologies he is willing to sacrifice are the best measures for reducing disease. Thanks to free trade and resulting economic growth, the average lifespan is now longer than at any time in history, food is more plentiful, and many diseases have been brought under control. Some diseases, like smallpox, have even been eradicated (although an act of terrorism could reintroduce smallpox). In their book, Spielman and D’Antonio note that modern living has also helped reduce insect-transmitted disease by limiting human exposure. They note that disease incidence declined as “improvement in the local economy provided better housing, roads, and utilities services such as water supplies, sewers, and electricity.” The world needs more development—not a “more natural” or primitive lifestyle.

Many of the world’s poor suffer because they lack items commonly found in the “sprawling” neighborhoods that Walters dubs short-sighted efforts to make the world more hospitable for humans.” For example, people in many poor countries do not have mosquito-proof housing with screened windows—leaving hundreds of millions of people exposed to disease. The world needs more development not a “more natural” lifestyle. Walters is misled into believing that certain technologies are easily dispensable. Consider the chapter on antibiotic use in farm animals. According to Walters, farmers use antibiotics because “in the short term, it’s cheaper to keep animals drugged than to keep them clean.” A chicken on a steady diet of antibiotics with their grain also grow a little faster, thereby making the producer’s extra money. “But farmers’ incentive to make ‘extra money’ has proved anything but disastrous. Modern farming practices enable farmers to produce more plentiful, healthier food at a lower cost to consumers, while producing less environmentally dangerous waste.

In a 1999 report on antibiotic resistance, the National Research Council (I R C ) notes that before modern breeding practices, it took far more time and feed to produce an animal that was ready for slaughter. Walters fails to note much of anything except his alleged evils. He is right that human actions, particularly human interactions, spread disease. In the 2001 book Mosquito, Harvard’s infectious disease expert Andrew Spielman and co-author Michael D’Antonio detail the ravages of infectious diseases that have occurred throughout history as humankind expanded trade and engaged in military conflict. Unlike Walters, those authors also describe the commendable efforts of individuals who labored to discover the causes of the sicknesses and develop cures. They understand the mistakes and challenges presented by commerce, but they also recognize the realities of this world: We cannot quarantine nations. Instead, Spielman and D’Antonio provide some valuable, practical advice for control methods in the modern world.

Six Plagues is also misleading because it ignores basic facts when detailing specific diseases and potential causes. The reader is misled into believing that certain technologies are easily dispensable. Consider the chapter on antibiotic use in farm animals. According to Walters, farmers use antibiotics because “in the short term, it’s cheaper to keep animals drugged than to keep them clean.” A chicken on a steady diet of antibiotics with their grain also grow a little faster, thereby making the producer’s extra money. “But farmers’ incentive to make ‘extra money’ has proved anything but disastrous. Modern farming practices enable farmers to produce more plentiful, healthier food at a lower cost to consumers, while producing less environmentally dangerous waste.

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Towards Libertarian Electricity

Reviewed by Richard L. Gordon

The End of a Natural Monopoly: Regulation and Competition in the Electric Power Industry
Edited by Peter Z. Grossman and Daniel H. Cole

For at least four decades, much of the discussion of public utilities was written for anthologies. The vast majority of those anthologies concentrated on improving the performance of public utility commissions; very rarely did the editors go beyond those discussions to include papers questioning the very rationale for utility commissions’ existence.

Peter Grossman and Daniel Cole’s new book, The End of a Monopoly, fills that void by offering a useful collection of challenges. The book contains 10 papers, six of which were written or co-written by the two editors. Grossman and Cole co-authored the introduction; Grossman, an economist, also contributed papers on the underlying economics, the history of regulation, and a concluding chapter reviewing prospects. Cole, an attorney, authored a chapter on “The Regulatory Contract,” and co-authored a chapter on stranded benefits and cost. The editors also contributed forewords to three chapters they did not write. Robert L. Bradley Jr. authored a shortened version of his history of electric power regulation; Joseph P. Tomain explores the prospects of electricity regulation; Jim Rossi treats the obligation to serve under deregulation, and Andrew P. Morriss discusses how economics get misinterpreted in the legal system.

Richard Posner’s Natural Monopoly and Antitrust regulation; he neglects Posner’s observation that another characteristic of natural monopoly is the ability to price efficiently and increase its monopoly profit. Thus, the natural monopoly is a problem of creating transfers of income. Posner believes that transfers are small and not clearly undesirable.

Grossman’s chapter on the regulatory situation, however, is problematic. The principal defect is the oversimplified discussion of optimal pricing. The first difficulty is a too-hasty treatment of cost alloc-