

Good critical thinking on what sparked the columbian exchange

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



The Columbian Exchange, coined by Alfred Crosby in 1986, refers to the massive movement from the Old World to the New World and back, of crops, animals, and diseases after the discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1492 (Grennes 2007, p. 91). The meeting of the Old and the New World drastically changed the fortunes not only of the natives inhabiting the newly discovered continents, but also of the European settlers and Europe as a whole. New species of animals were introduced to the Americas that helped in farming and transportation. On the other hand, new species of crops were introduced into Europe that helped fend off the threat famine and stabilized European economies. The Columbian Exchange brought both gains and losses to the Old and New Worlds alike. It was initially precipitated by the ambitious desire of expansionism and search for wealth, and later on for the need to survive in an alien land.

Reasons for the Voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492

In the late 15th century, Spain and Portugal were at the height of their political and imperial power. Both sent voyages here and there to discover new trade routes that would potentially expand their markets and empires. These trade routes sought to reach China, Japan and Spice Islands. Portugal was leading the European exploration contest until Christopher Columbus' voyage in 1492. Under Prince Henry's leadership, the Portuguese were able to discover several Atlantic Islands, set up slave-trading post in the western side of North Africa, and increased trade with West Africa. In 1492, however, Portugal refused Columbus' application for sponsorship of his planned voyage that was intended to sail west across the Atlantic Ocean to search for new routes to the East. King John II, successor of Henry refused to sponsor

the voyage because he believed that Columbus' distance estimates of Europe and Asia were wrong. Undeterred, Columbus went to Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain and succeeded in convincing them of the value of his planned voyage. The Spanish monarchs agreed to sponsor the trip to find new routes to the East in the hope of increasing the wealth of Spain. They also planned to spread Christianity by converting pagans in other lands (Johnson pp. 29-30; Wallech et al 2013).

The Emergence of the Columbian Exchange

The accidental discovery of the Americas by Columbus, who was originally looking for new trade routes to the East, precipitated both gains and losses for both the Old and New Worlds. Upon discovery by subsequent voyages that the newly discovered lands were not part of Asia, European merchants came to the New World to find gold and silver. To do this, they set up the first successful European colony in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607 mistakenly believing that they could find such treasures in the place. They also believed that the place could be a new route to North America from where they could sail from the Pacific Ocean coast to China. All these did not materialize, but as an unintended consequence the Columbian Exchange was triggered (Mann 2011, pp. 40-41).

The Jamestown colony, named after James I of England, became the starting point of the Columbian Exchange. To be able to survive while they were looking for gold and silver and all the other goals for setting up the colony, the European merchants, mostly Englishmen relied on native crops, such as corn. Pre-Columbian America, according to (Mann 2011) did not have much

variety of domesticated animals, but only dogs, llamas, guinea pigs, alpacas, turkeys, ducks and iguanas (p. 44). The lack of domesticated animals made it hard for the settlers to clear fields and plant crops. The Powhatan Indians, cleared their fields manually by circling the area to be planted with fire to burn the trees within. The settlers grew tobacco, which they exported to England, to make money, but they had to import tobacco seeds from the Caribbean because the local tobacco was not to their liking. Tobacco soon became a profitable export from Virginia (Fishkin p. 28).

The establishment of the first colony in Jamestown and subsequently in others, paved the way for the massive transplantation of crops, animal species and even diseases from Europe to the Americas and from the latter to the former. According to Grennes (2007), it was the New World that gained the most from the Columbian Exchange because of its less diverse plants and animal species. Fossil remains in America revealed that large mammals such as horses and mammoths became extinct several centuries before 1492. The Columbian Exchange doubled and even tripled its cultivable plants, Chickens, cattle, pigs, sheep, horses and donkeys were brought in from the Old World to the New World as well as crops like wheat, rice, oats, barley, rye, onions, garlic, lettuce, cabbage and bananas. In addition, new tools, such as iron tools and wheels, which made life relatively easier, were also imported. On the other hand, the Old World gained new crops like potatoes, tomatoes, corn, and cocoa (pp. 92-93, 96).

Nonetheless, the Columbian Exchange brought catastrophe to the Old World in the form of diseases for which the natives had no immunity from.

According to Nunn & Quinn (2010), deadly viruses and bacteria from

smallpox, measles, typhus, bubonic plague, influenza, scarlet fever, diphtheria, malaria and cholera succeeded in rapidly decreasing the population of natives. It is estimated that 80-95% of the native population in the first 100 years following the discovery of Columbus of the New World was lost due to the diseases that the Europeans brought with them. Some tribes became extinct, like the Taino in Hispanola, whose population was estimated to be between 60, 000 and 8 million prior to their disappearance from the face of the earth (Nunn & Qian 2010, p. 164).

The Old World had also their share of imported disease in the form of syphilis at a time when the disease was still considered fatal because of the absence of cure. Today, however, the disease can be cured by penicillin. The earlier strain of syphilis was fatal and included symptoms such as rashes, genital ulcers, large tumors, severe pain, and dementia. New studies have confirmed that the disease had indeed originated in the Old World, particularly in Guyana, South America (Nunn & Qian 2010, pp. 167-168).

The Columbian Exchange also opened the floodgates of slavery in America. The tobacco plantations that mushroomed in Virginia as a result of the settlers' establishment of a colony in Jamestown necessitated a big labor force to work on them and on the farms of the settlers. The opportunity for more help came in 1619 when a ship of Dutch traders docked in Virginia and traded 20 Africans. Slaves were initially treated as indentured servants until eventually slavery became an institution that spread to other colonies subsequently established in the United States. In the 1690s, the first legislation covering slavery was passed in Virginia, which provided for the tax rate for the slave importation of Dutch and other foreign importers

(Finkelman 2012, p. 110).

Some authors (Mann 2011, Nunn & Qian 2010, Grennes 2007) cited the positive role of Columbian Exchange to the Industrial Revolution – the revolution to machineries that began in Great Britain. Citing Pomeranz (2010), Grennes believed that the agricultural boom in the US resulting from the Columbian Exchange led to the establishment of a pattern in international specialization that was evident in the Industrial Revolution. Before 1492, there was no significant economic movement in Europe, but with the emergence of the Columbian Exchange, potato eliminated the threat of famine in Europe through the stability of its supply. This is because, according to Mann (2011), potatoes are easier to plant and easier to maintain than grains, upon which Europe was solely dependent upon for food before the Columbian Exchange. The stability that these products brought to Europe and Great Britain had fuelled the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century.

Conclusion: The Impact of the Columbian Exchange

The Columbian Exchange made a considerable impact on the world – an impact that is more than ever evident to this day. Sparked initially by the ambition for expansionism and the quest for precious metals and subsequently for the need to survive in an alien land, the Columbian Exchange first took root in Europe's first colony in the United States. It was in Jamestown, Virginia that English settlers learned to depend on local root crops for survival and import plant seeds and animals from Europe to fully establish a home in the New World and earn money by establishing

plantations and farms that could raise crops that could be exported to Europe. All of these resulted in the transplantation of plant and animal species from one continent to the other. Thus, while the Exchange has augmented the species of plants and animals in the New World, it has also brought to Europe new crops that helped fight the threat of famine. The stability of food supplies helped sustained Europe, stabilized Great Britain eventually leading to the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century. However, not everything was positive about the Columbian Exchange because it brought about the decimation of millions of native population as well as introduced the slavery institution in America. The coming of European settlers to the New World brought viruses, such as chicken pox, typhus, smallpox and other diseases that were then still deadly and deadlier to the natives because of their lack of immunity to them. On the other hand, the Old World gained syphilis, which had no cure back then, from the Americas as a result of the Columbian Exchange. The Exchange also introduced slavery to the Americas. All in all, both sides gained and likewise made losses as a result of the Exchange, losses and gains that were shared eventually by the entire world.

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