

Reading 3: A Changing Political, Economic & Biological Ecology

Columbus's voyages and the later invasions in both South and North America by the Spanish, Portuguese, English, and French set off many changes that had far-reaching consequences. Below are some of the changes.

FOOD AND POPULATION

The list of what Columbus and those who followed him took back to Europe is long. They didn't find the spices of Asia, but they found allspice, tomatoes, peanuts, pepper, pineapple, raspberries, yams, vanilla, cocoa beans, and tobacco. Tobacco would become a major industry, and for hundreds of years to follow, growers would want slaves to keep production going.

Arguably the most important imports to Europe were corn and potatoes. Europeans had been depending on wheat, but most people could not grow enough of it to feed their families, pay taxes, and sell for cash. Corn and potatoes yielded much more food per acre. The potato in Europe and in Africa helped cut starvation and allowed the populations to grow. Imports from the Americas also came into Asia.

To the Americas, Europeans brought sugar cane, which, like tobacco, led to widespread use of enslaved people. They also brought chickens (and eggs) and horses and cows, which were adopted in the "new" world. Horses gave the Europeans advantages in battle and commerce, and the indigenous population quickly adapted to using them, from the pampas of Argentina to the U.S. plains. The Europeans would not hand over guns, so indigenous people never had a chance against such lethal weapons.

DISEASE

At the same time that these food imports helped the populations of Europe and Africa to increase, the diseases brought by the Europeans wiped out almost the entire indigenous population. Europe had smallpox and bubonic plague, which had killed millions, but those who survived had developed immunity. Peoples of the Americas had very sophisticated medical knowledge, but they had never been exposed to those diseases or to measles or the flu. They died by the millions. True numbers will never be known.

GOLD AND SILVER

It took Columbus a while to find the gold he had come for, but once he did, he and others used brutal force to take it. Subsequent invaders found much more gold and silver further inland. Spain and Portugal became very rich countries, and their gold and silver flooded the markets, upsetting balances of trade. Prior to this large influx of gold and silver, the chief basis for wealth was land. The northern European countries developed industries that could sell goods to the southern countries for which they were paid in gold.

Sources consulted:

"Seeds of Change," by Barbara Stauffer

<http://www.pbs.org/gunsgermssteel/variables/smallpox.html><http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/reference/worldhistory/sections/19impact.html>