READING | Columbian Exchange — An Introduction — Jake Thurman

Columbian Exchange was a term first coined by Alfred Crosby in his appropriately titled book, The Columbian Exchange (1972). Within that text, Crosby presented the far-reaching impacts of the reintroduction of Afro-Eurasia and the Americas, which began with the voyages of Christopher Columbus in 1492. While his work largely focused on ecology and biology, he also included quite a bit about some of the major ways that Columbian Exchange impacted the future of human civilization. Among the most central impacts were the ways in which the effects of Columbian Exchange changed the societies, cultures, and politics of both Afro-Eurasia and the Americas. But before we dig into those topics, what exactly was Columbian Exchange?

Columbian Exchange involved the movement of peoples, plants, animals, diseases, ideas, technology, and just about everything else, between what you’ll sometimes see referred to as the “Old” World and the “New.” This exchange saw things like sugar, pigs, Christianity, and smallpox travel from “Old” to “New,” while things like tobacco, potatoes, and syphilis went back the other way. Basically, stuff that had once been isolated to one side of the world or another was now being exchanged, though not always voluntarily or intentionally, between the “Old” and “New” Worlds. Before we delve too deeply into Columbian Exchange, let’s have a few words about this whole “Old” World and “New” World concept.

The “Old” World consisted of places you probably already know quite a bit about. Almost all of our recorded human histories prior to the arrival of Columbus in the Caribbean come from the “Old” World of Africa, Europe, and Asia, or Afro-Eurasia. The Han Dynasty, the Greeks, the Arab Empires of the Middle East, the Buddha, Mansa Musa, all of that? “Old” World. The thing is though, as I’m sure you already know, the “New” World wasn’t really new at all.

The peoples of North and South America had their own rich cultures and histories, too. Some of the groups may be familiar to you, like the Olmecs, Mayans, Aztecs, or Inca, but what’s important to understand is that humans had been living in the “New” World for at least 14,000 years. Those people had very diverse ways of life, much like their fellow homo sapiens in the “Old” World.

Having studied World History for some time now, hopefully you would agree that trying to describe every person or group within the “Old” World with any broadly sweeping generalizations wouldn’t do justice to the diversity of experiences that you’ve been learning about. Similarly, we should probably avoid the sweeping generalizations that are too often made about the peoples of the “New” World. In fact, the very terms “Old” World and “New” World lend themselves to the myth that what existed in Afro-Eurasia was deeper in its history and its meaning, and therefore somehow better than what existed in the Americas. It also implies that the “New” World was just sitting there waiting to be colonized (or worse yet “civilized”) by the “Old.” This categorization can make us think that, somehow, the Americas’ thousands of years of history didn’t matter as much. To avoid slipping into this trap, let’s agree to some new terms. What we’ve previously referred to as the “Old” World, we’ll call Afro-Eurasia from here on out. The “New” World? We’ll simply refer to that as the Americas. Sound good? Great.

While we’re on the topics of nomenclature, the Columbian Exchange isn’t really all that much about Christopher Columbus. It takes its name from him because the processes
started with his arrival in the Caribbean, but at its core, it’s about understanding how the reconnection of Afro-Eurasia and the Americas helped to shape the Early Modern era. The effects of Columbian Exchange would have a profound impact on World History, and not just the part about us humans. The ripples of this exchange are way bigger than us and our ancestors. It impacted the ecology of the Earth itself, and in pretty big ways. But before we get into that, we need to first figure out why this was taking place to begin with.

Columbian Exchange itself is an effect of something that happened before it. That something was the arrival of Europeans in the Americas in the late 15th century. So, why were the Europeans so interested in heading across the Atlantic Ocean to begin with? Also, how were they able to be successful in bringing so much of the Americas’ land, peoples, and resources under European control? The simple answer to this was that Europeans possessed certain practical advantages over the Native American peoples they encountered and certain motivational advantages over the other empires that might have similarly been capable of dominating the Western Hemisphere. Additionally, circumstances along with social, political, economic, and cultural factors motivated European exploration and colonization across the Atlantic.

European motivations can be boiled down to some basic factors, many of which were, at least in part, economic. First, Europeans were largely on the outside looking in at the lucrative trade taking place in the Indian Ocean. This “monsoon marketplace” provided a network of exchange among the many diverse groups that populated the Indian Ocean basin and their many valuable resources. By the late 15th century, Muslim merchants had come to dominate much of the trade, and their position between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean allowed them to dictate quite a bit about how that trade would extend into Europe. This led to both the Portuguese expeditions around Africa and Columbus’s voyages across the Atlantic in search of new trade routes to Asia. These economic motivations extended beyond the wishes of monarchs and to individuals, too. Europe’s growing, independent merchant class sought access to goods without the price gouging of relay trade, and other classes saw opportunity to access new sources of wealth in burgeoning colonies. While not necessarily separate from the economic factors, the idea of competition between nations was certainly important as well. The various states in Western Europe were in competition with one another to gain a foothold in both the trade routes to the Indian Ocean and the newly discovered territories across the Atlantic. Basically, economic and political rivalries between states influenced rulers into engaging in competition, which manifested itself in the chartering of expeditions and claiming of colonies. A further motivation was the desire to spread Christianity across new horizons. These motivations are all the more potent due to the fact that European states and institutions were willing to put so much energy and resources into supporting people’s forays into expanding markets and territories into the Americas. To put all of this more succinctly, the exploration and the conquest of the Americas was largely born of a desire for to gain wealth, power, and influence while serving God and country. As Spanish soldier Bernal Diaz de Castillo put it, “We came here to serve God, and the King, and also to get rich.”

As I’m sure you’re aware, having the motivation to do something difficult is a large part of the battle, but to be successful there are other things that must fall into place. For example, a tone-deaf history teacher with a love for singing may have all the motivation or desire in the world, but without some inherent advantages, like not being tone
and in the best position to take advantage of the natural wind patterns and ocean currents used when travelling across the Atlantic. Unlike the Indian Ocean networks, where knowledge of the shifts in monsoon winds was required to successfully navigate, the patterns of the North Atlantic were much more regular.

Western Europe also possessed the technology necessary to both get large quantities of ships, goods and people to the Americas with routine success and to also subdue the powerful empires that inhabited some of the continents’ most valuable territories. European guns and iron weapons would prove to be a great advantage over the Amerindian groups they encountered early on. Another advantage was the horse. Domesticated horses will later become a staple of life for many Native American groups, but the horses that showed up with the Europeans were the first seen in that part of the world since early horses were wiped out approximately 12,000 years ago. Again, the Europeans weren’t the only ones in the world with such seafaring technology, weapons, or horses. In fact, much of what they did possess were technologies that originated in other parts of Afro-Eurasia and were either copied or later improved upon by Europeans, but the point remains that their most threatening potential competitors from Asia never desired to enter the contest.

Another distinct advantage possessed by Europeans was the fact that the Amerindian empires that did stand in the way of European domination of the Americas were not well suited to take on such a challenge. In addition to not having the iron weapons and armor, guns, or horses possessed by Europeans, the Aztec and Inca had political situations that were unsuitable for rallying a response to this new threat from across the Atlantic. When the Spanish showed up in Mesoamerica (the territory from about central Mexico to Costa Rica, today), the peoples on the outskirts of Aztec
territory were open to the idea of supporting the new power against the Aztec Empire. They were treated harshly by the Aztecs and many actually joined conquistador Hernan Cortes in his conquest of Tenochtitlan. Similarly, many Inca were open to the idea of allying with the Spanish as a means of preserving their power over peasants in their territories. Additionally, the Inca were still reeling from a prolonged civil war that took place in the years just preceding conquistador Francisco Pizarro’s arrival in South America. These circumstances served to undermine existing Amerindian empires and their ability to keep their territory and its resources out of Spanish hands. While significant in its own right, this advantage pales in comparison to the one the Spanish unwittingly possessed, that of disease.

Native Americans possessed no resistance to the diseases and germs carried by the Europeans and Africans that arrived in the Western Hemisphere during the late 15th and into the 16th century. The peoples in the Americas had lived in isolation from not only the people and technology of Afro-Eurasia, but also its diseases. You might be wondering why the Americans, whose ancestors crossed into North America from Asia, wouldn’t bring with them their resistance to diseases from that part of the world. Or, perhaps, why the Europeans weren’t sick themselves if they were carrying around these deadly pathogens? Well, the answer to both of these questions relates to both groups’ exposure to a diverse group of other humans and their proximity to domesticated animals.

Europeans and Africans had long been exposed to the germs and diseases carried by their livestock. They had also been exposed to diseases from other parts of the world through the vast Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and Silk Roads trading networks (remember the plague?). As such, those Europeans and Africans who were alive in the 15th or 16th century possessed resistance to deadly diseases like smallpox. The Amerindians, however, did not.

While the ancestors of American Indians did come to the Americas from Asia, they did so at a time before domestication of animals (other than the dog, really). As such, they had not been exposed to the diseases that afflict humans who live in close contact with large domesticated animals like pigs or cows. Furthermore, the absence of these large, domesticated animals in their new home, the Americas, would set up the Amerindian for the most devastating effect of the European’s arrival. Without any resistance to the pathogens carried by the Europeans showing up on their shores, the Indians contracted Afro-Eurasian diseases in huge numbers, and their populations were decimated. This made it much easier for the Europeans, particularly the Spanish in Meso and South America and the British in North America, to spread their influence and take control of larger and larger territories. In the case of the Spanish in South America, the diseases brought to the coasts by Europeans spread so rapidly that many within the Incan Empire had died from smallpox before the Spanish ever set foot in the Andes Mountains.

So, in order to understand why Columbian Exchange occurred in the first place, it’s important to look at the factors that encouraged the Europeans across the Atlantic and the effects of history and geography that created the advantages the Europeans needed to succeed in their ventures. As you’ll see, these European advantages will lead Columbian Exchange to have disproportionate effects on the various peoples involved.