The exchanges that occurred during the Columbian Exchange were not equal. The advantages possessed by Europeans created a situation in which the Americas and their peoples were largely at the mercy of the European colonizers. This event was largely an environmental, social, cultural, and demographic disaster for the roughly 60-80 million people living in the Americas at the turn of the 16th Century. That being said, it is important to remember that those that survived the initial conquests exercised considerable agency in the ways that they interacted with and reacted to this new order.

The Europeans that arrived in the Americas were generations removed from their people’s initial exposure to the contagions they would go on to spread to the Indians. One of the consequences of the Americas’ isolation of the Western Hemisphere from the networks of exchange in the Eastern was that the Indians had never been exposed to the germs that Europeans and Africans would bring to their shores. The Spanish that were disembarking in South America, for example, had both visible weapons and armor, like guns and steel, but they also possessed invisible implements of conquest. They had their unseen weapons, germs, and their unseen armor, immunity (or at least high levels of resistance) to the devastating diseases mentioned above. So much more devastating were these weapons that, by the time Spanish Conquistadors reached the Andes empire of the Inca, the population was already dealing with heavy losses due to European diseases.

The chief characteristic of the European conquest of the Americas was the enormous toll that diseases from Afro-Eurasia took on the populations of North and South America and the islands of the Caribbean. Diseases like smallpox, typhus, influenza, and yellow fever raged through native communities, creating what’s become known as The Great Dying. On the densely populated Caribbean islands, the Indians were all but completely wiped out by 1550. While that is the most extreme example, death tolls of up to 90 percent were not uncommon in other parts of the Western Hemisphere. How was this possible? How did the seemingly healthy people of Europe bring on such a pandemic by travelling across an ocean? The short answer, geography.

The Great Dying and the environmental devastation being but two of the more pronounced impacts of European incursion into the Western Hemisphere. By contrast, the effect of the Exchange on Western Europe and other parts of Afro-Eurasia was, at the very least, a more positive one. Commodities from the Americas brought great wealth to both Europe and China, and fundamentally changed the nature of commerce. Foods from the West revolutionized global diets, helping foster a population boom.

It is important to also note that these positive effects were not absolute or in any way uniform across Afro-Eurasia. The most glaring exception to any analysis of the Columbian Exchange as beneficial to those in the Eastern Hemisphere was the horrors of the enslavement and forced migration of peoples from Africa. Without the Great Dying and the European desire for cheap labor to work the plantations of the Caribbean and Brazil, in particular, this most heinous of crimes would never have been committed on such a scale. The most heartbreaking leg of the Triangular Trade that emerged between Europe, Africa, and America, would thus have been nonexistent if that triangle remained unknown. The terrorizing, dehumanizing nature of this trade is the topic of a later article, but it bears mentioning here.
In addition to the function that the interconnectedness of Afro-Eurasian societies played in exposing the Europeans to diseases, even before that, their animals played an important, albeit unknown to them, role. Large mammals, like the ones humans had been domesticating in Afro-Eurasia for millennia, were essential to people in Eurasia gaining acquired immunity to certain diseases. These animals lived in close contact with human beings and have more diseases, like smallpox, that made the jump to humans. Unfortunately for the Indians, the Americas were almost completely devoid of these large, domesticated mammals. Remember all of the hits from the kids' song, “Old MacDonald”? Unless your version included llamas or alpacas, all of those animals were unknown to the Western Hemisphere until Europeans brought them along on their voyages of conquest. The cows, pigs, horses, and sheep that populate farms across the Western Hemisphere were not here until after Columbus. Well, technically, horses were here before, but the last of the native North American horses died out over a million years before anything you’ve been learning about in this course.

The Great Dying caused a huge demographic shift in the Americas. The previous indigenous population was decimated, and there were now Europeans living on the continents. In addition, the deaths of the Indians led to a massive labor shortage, which the Europeans eventually filled with enslaved people from Africa. Thus, in the century following Columbus’s arrival from Spain, the Western Hemisphere was economically and demographically brought into a new global network of exchange and migration. This came at great cost to the Indians, both those that died and those that survived the Great Dying, and the millions of Africans caught up in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

Placing the slave trade aside for the time being, the economic impacts of the Columbian Exchange on Afro-Eurasia were great. Silver became the first truly global commodity. Mined in places like Potosi in present day Bolivia, Spanish silver made its way across both the Atlantic and Pacific, and accounted for roughly eighty percent of the silver in circulation. In Europe, this helped to make Spain into the dominant power of the 16th Century, while in Asia, much of the precious metal ended up in China. As such, the explosion of the silver trade helped to facilitate the global trade in other goods, such as Chinese manufactured goods. This especially ramped up as the Ming emperors shifted to requiring all taxes be paid in silver. This change rippled throughout the Chinese economy and burdened the rural poor with reinventing their economic lives to be able to exchange their labor and product for silver.

In Spain, the results of the trade in silver were not all positive. While the increase in wealth led to immediate prosperity and a rise in Spain’s international profile, they failed to account for the increase in the supply of silver to such a degree that they were derailed by the rampant inflation that eventually came along. This resulted in a rapid increase in prices in Spain and a rapid downturn in their economy. Also, Spain’s wealth inspired it to be more ambitious in its international affairs. This ambition led to several wars, which cost a lot of money and ended up not working out exactly how the Spanish had planned (cough, Spanish Armada, cough). In short, the vast increase in available silver because of the Columbian Exchange had profound effects on economies across Afro-Eurasia, though not all of these effects were positive.

The way these new American societies were shaped depended on the economic basis of their existence. In Mexico and the Andes region of South America, the economy was largely based on large-scale agriculture or the mining of gold and silver. In both cases the surviving Indians were the subject to the ruling colonial elites. As such, they provided the vast
majority of the labor. This labor was not provided freely, but instead the Spanish employed various methods to coerce labor out of the Indians. Two of the major systems used were the encomienda and hacienda systems.

The encomienda system granted Spanish elites control over numbers of natives under the guise that they would extract their labor in exchange for protection and Christianity. With little oversight, these arrangements quickly deteriorated into a method for the new encomenderos to seize native lands and enslave the people on them.

The horrors of this system were reported by missionaries like Bartolome de las Casas, who wrote extensively of the physical damage being done to the Indians and the spiritual damage done to the Spaniards. Eventually, these protests led to the end of the encomienda system, as it was replaced by a system, known as repartimiento, in which greater control over coerced labor was given to representatives of the Spanish Crown who then allotted workers to local mines and farms. This new system was, in many ways, similar to the mita system that the Inca employed in Peru. The Indian communities were not slaves, as they were not directly owned or controlled by the people for whom they were working, but they were instead required to surrender a certain number of laborers for employment in the mines for a predetermined amount of time. While not technically slaves, observing the conditions under which the natives were working in either the encomienda or repartimiento systems might lead you to wonder what the difference was.

By the 1600s, the encomienda had been replaced by the repartimiento in most places. Eventually, the ownership of land became more profitable than the exporting of goods to the global marketplace. This led to the development of the hacienda. Under this system, large estates were controlled by colonial elites and the work on these estates was carried out by waged laborers of native or mixed race. While this may seem better, the Indians were still subject to harsh working conditions, low wages, and high taxes. These haciendas largely produced goods for local consumption, including food for the workers in nearby mines.

It should be obvious, but this economic system was one in which race or ethnicity mattered greatly. The societies that sprung up around this economic system reflected this in many ways. At the top of the proverbial pyramid were the peninsulares. These were people born on the Iberian Peninsula, where Spain and Portugal sit. They were the original colonial elite, but would diminish in number as time passed and people of European descent were born in the Americas. These people, known as the creoles, will come to dominate the social order over the next few centuries.

The status of Indians in these societies could vary slightly, but they were largely kept at the bottom of both the Mexican and Peruvian societies. Many Indians coped with their predicament by creating an identity for themselves within these new structures. Learning the Spanish language and religion were two major ways this occurred. Shifting their artisanal production to match the desires of the colonial elite also helped create an economic space in which a few natives were able to operate. The Indians, of course, also sought to maintain as much of their own culture and found ways in which their traditions could continue. An example of this would be the way that Christianity developed in Latin America. Rather than adopting Spanish Catholicism whole cloth, there emerged in these areas a hybridized version of Christianity that, when possible incorporated native ritual and indigenous gods. These gods survived as the Indians attributed their roles and characteristics to the saints of the Europeans.
Another social group that emerged in the Spanish colonies of the Americas was the mestizo. These people were of mixed European and Indian ancestry. They occupied a diverse, middle space between those of Spanish descent and the Indians. The existence of a mestizo population, which was a large portion of the societies in Spanish America, spoke to a few different causes. The most important was that the Spanish largely came over in male-heavy waves. There were so many more men than women that many men took wives from the native populations. By contrast, the lives of the few Spanish women in the Americas was very restricted and relations with people of other races was forbidden. This double standard helped to deeply entrench the patriarchal nature of colonial society. In contrast, for many Indian women, taking a Spanish husband and producing mestizo offspring was a way to climb a social ladder of sorts. While such voluntary involvement with Spanish men certainly happened, there should be no mistaking the fact that untold numbers of native women were also subject to routine sexual violence at the hands of the Spanish, and the children resulting from these injustices also contributed to the growing number of mestizos.

The emerging mestizo population was not treated uniformly as they were divided into castas based on skin color and parentage. For some mestizos the ability to pass as more European could reap them huge benefits, which speaks to the racist nature of the society they were operating within.

Another impact of Columbian Exchange and the rapid colonization of the Americas was the shift in Western Europe’s economic base. As Europe gained a greater foothold in global trade through its Atlantic connections, Western Europe underwent what was known as the Commercial Revolution. Colonization provided both a new source of raw materials and new markets for European products. This led to an increase in commerce and exchange for Europeans. As such, they themselves began to develop a greater culture of consumption. This transition had profound effects on European society. The urban class that dominated manufacturing and finance became known as the bourgeoisie. This emerging class challenged the aristocracy for economic and (eventually) political power. This new found commercial success led to the creation of joint-stock companies. Joint-stock companies were businesses that were often backed by government-granted monopolies on trade in certain areas. They sold shares to individuals to raise money for trading enterprises and to spread the risk among the investors. Another consequence of the expansion of commerce was the development of stock exchanges. These were marketplaces where shares of companies could be bought and sold. The greatest stock exchange of this time was the Amsterdam Exchange in the Netherlands. Early on, the Dutch were leaders in this commercial revolution, though they’d later be replaced by the British.

Governments adjusted their economic plan to fit this new reality. Out of the Columbian Exchange, Colonization, and the Commercial Revolution, the economic system of mercantilism was born. Mercantilism was designed to preserve a nation’s existing wealth while they attempted to add to it by acquiring precious metals. This was accomplished through the establishment of colonies and the requirement that those colonies only participate in commerce with the mother country. This policy had some broad, but important consequences. First, it led to an increased desire for colonial possessions. The more colonies a nation had, the better it could play the mercantilist game. Second, mercantilism led to increased economic and political conflict between European nations. The Commercial Revolution and shift to a mercantilist economy led to wars of religion being replaced by wars to preserve
the balance of power between European nations. Two of the prime participants in this system were France and Britain. Under Louis XIV France became a mercantilist power with its own joint stock companies and government-granted monopolies on colonial trade. The continental rivalry between France and Britain soon became a vast colonial rivalry. This culminated in the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763), which took place on three continents. While many of these are topics for later lessons, it’s important to understand that these events that will come to shape world history were from the seeds planted by the Columbian Exchange and European colonization of the Americas.

By contrast, in the British colonies of North America that emerged a century after the Spanish and Portuguese staked their claims in the more valuable lands to the south, such racial mixing was an exception. No notable class of mixed-race people emerged in these places because the British arrived in far greater numbers with boats filled with entire families. This more equitable gender balance was a primary difference in how these areas would come to be populated.

Yet another difference emerged in the Caribbean. Due to the almost complete depopulation of native groups, an encomienda-style system was impossible. Instead, what developed was large-scale plantation agriculture. The laborers were enslaved peoples from Africa, and the most lucrative product they cultivated was sugar. These societies developed a similar race-based structure in which those of European descent dominated those of mixed-race or African lineage.

What this means in a wider view is that the societies that emerged because of Columbian Exchange were notably diverse. They incorporated both the peoples and cultures of societies in America, Africa, and Europe. The legacy of this can still be seen in the societies and cultures of nations throughout Western Hemisphere today.

In addition to the economic and political impact of the Columbian Exchange, there were immense societal and cultural changes, too. The influx of new crops from the Americas fundamentally changed the diets of people across Afro-Eurasia. In China, the sweet potato became a staple of the peasant diet. African diets were shaped by the acquisition of new plants, especially cassava. In both of these places, as well as Europe, corn, potatoes, and other American crops would be fuel for the rapid explosion of global population in the Early Modern era.

The European diet expanded from the bread and beer of the Middle Ages to include the calorically robust new crops from the Western Hemisphere. Potatoes became irreplaceable for many, as was evident by the devastation of the 19th century Irish Famine. American crops like corn were also used as feed for animals, which meant that meat was now on the menu for more people. This new more effective diet combined with a revolution in agricultural practices to more efficiently fill the bellies of the growing European population. It also contributed to longer, healthier lives for many in Western Europe.

The influx of new information, which accompanied the plants, animals, and peoples to whom Europeans were being exposed to for the first time, also had a profound effect on European and world history. It irreversibly challenged conventional wisdom. This helped to contribute to the larger paradigm shift that became known as the Scientific Revolution, which in turn helped spawn the ideas of the Enlightenment.

The combination of this revolution in commerce, thought, and agriculture, gave Western Europe the foundation necessary
for what’s arguably one of the greatest changes since we discussed farming way back in unit one, the Industrial Revolution. While about three hundred years separated Columbus from industrialization, it is important not to lose sight of how the two are connected.

One final way that Columbian Exchange impacted the Americas was environmentally. The Europeans sought to make their colonies in the image of the lifestyles and desires of the mother countries. The introduction of the aforementioned large domesticated animals, as well as domesticated plants like coffee, sugarcane, wheat, rice, and dozens of other fruits and vegetables, fundamentally changed the diets and lifestyles of the surviving Indian populations. The idea of nomadic Indians riding on horseback and living on the open plains would have been impossible before this exchange. This part of the exchange had such obvious effects on the societies that emerged, but its effects on the environment shouldn’t be overlooked. Native plant and animal species were displaced and, in many cases, driven to extinction by the invasive new species from Afro-Eurasia. The clearing of land to grow cash crops, especially in places like Haiti, would make soil erosion and depletion a very real concern in the centuries to come.

All told, the Columbian Exchange was nothing short of revolutionary for the peoples and places involved. For the first time, a truly global history can be spoken of as people from Afro-Eurasia brought their peoples, plants, and animals to bear on the unsuspecting Americas. In doing so, they paved the way for the emergence of Europe in the Early Modern era and everything from the Industrial Revolution to Globalization. As such, it is also necessary to explore the effects of the other side of this unequal exchange. In doing so, we’ll see that the revolutionary consequences of this interaction were not reserved only for the Western Hemisphere.

On the eve of Columbian Exchange, Western Europe literally sat on the edge of Eurasia, figuratively on the outside looking in at the wealth and power of its distant neighbors. It is no coincidence that, in such a short time, Western European powers would emerge and come to dominate and play a large role in shaping the most recent eras of world history. It is Columbian Exchange that made this burgeoning modern world possible.