The Columbian Exchange
AP World History
Kienast

The Columbian Exchange refers to the comingling of Eurasian, African, and American plants, animals, people, and pathogens that began in 1492, after the discovery of the Americas by Columbus. This exchange led to a number of changes in the world.

Plants:

Eurasian and African crops such as wheat, barley, rice, turnips, fruit trees, sugar, and okra were brought to the Americas. American crops such as maize (corn), white potatoes, sweet potatoes, and manioc (cassava) helped feed many Africans and Eurasians. Domesticated animals were brought from Europe, giving Native Americans animals that could be used for labor such as the cow and horse. Other Eurasian animals such as chickens, pigs, and sheep were brought to the Americas as well. It is worth remembering that these animal importations had an impact on the Americas due to the few animals that were domesticated in the Americas. Only llamas, alpacas, dogs, a few fowl, and guinea pigs were domesticated. Many of the animals such as rats, pigs, chickens, and mosquitoes brought pathogens with them.

Pathogens:

Due to their lack of exposure to European diseases, Native Americans died from diseases brought over by the Europeans such as smallpox, measles, chickenpox, influenza, malaria, and yellow fever. A large number of Native Americans were killed in conflicts with Europeans, but the majority died from disease.

Demographic changes:

While the Columbian Exchange led to population growth in Eurasia due to importation of crops such as potatoes and corn, it also led to population collapse in Americas due to disease. Eventually Europeans and Africans migrated to the Americas in large numbers between 1450 and 1750, eventually more than replacing the number of Native Americans that died.

Another demographic change was the importation of African slaves that were used to harvest crops in the Americas. Almost immediately after the discovery of the Americas, Europeans saw potential for the growth of cash crops, products such as sugar, cotton and tobacco that are grown on large plantations for the purpose of revenue rather than for nutrition. Europeans knew they could make money by growing cash crops in the Americas but they also lacked the labor force necessary for them to have such large plantations. Fortunately for Europeans, West Africa was struggling through a time of war between the various tribal groups located along the coasts. These tribal groups had plentiful prisoners of war that they traded to Europeans for cloth, guns, and other manufactures. The sale of guns to West Africans only increased the civil strife in West Africa, leading to even more prisoners of war. The result was the African Diaspora, the forced migration of nearly ten million West Africans to the Americas.

While Africans were forced to work in the Americas, Europeans also used other forms of forced, coerced and semi-coerced labor in the Americas. Before the large scale importation of African slaves, Europeans used indentured servants for manual labor in the colonies. Indentured servants agreed to work for a landowner for a set amount of time, usually around seven years, in exchange for a release from a debt they owed or in exchange for free passage to the Americas. Indentured servants were free to live in the Americas and own land after their service was complete. The use of indentured servitude declined as greater numbers of African slaves were brought to the Americas. The Native Americans who survived the initial waves of disease were also forced to labor for Europeans. Spain was particularly involved in native forced labor. In North and Central American Spanish colonies a forced labor system called the *Encomienda* was initially used. The *Encomienda* system gave land grants and the native people that went with those lands to wealthy Spaniards called *Peninsulares*. This system was rife with abuse and was eventually replaced with the *Hacienda* system. The *Hacienda* System differed because laborers were seen more as employees rather than slaves and estate owners were charged with the protection of laborers. In South America the Spanish used the Inca *mit'a* system to control the population. Though the *mit'a* system was more or less a social expectation under the Inca, the Spanish warped it into a forced labor system, mostly for use in the infamous silver mines such as the Potosí silver mine in modern-day Bolivia.

<u>New trade network</u>
The Atlantic System, also known as the Triangular trade network, was the result of the discovery of the Americas. The trade involved the shipment of cloth, firearms, and metal wares to Africa, in exchange for slaves who were sent to the Americas. The Americas produced cash crops, which were traded to Europe and made into manufactured goods such as cloth.

<u>Cultural changes</u>
New social classes in Latin America began to rise due to the Columbian Exchange. The *peninsulares* were at the top of the social hierarchy, followed by the *creoles*, who were whites born in Americas to European parents. The *creoles* were followed by *mestizos*, children of Amerindians and Europeans. Mulattos were children of Europeans and Africans.

The influx of all of these new cultures created synthesis of languages, foods, and religion. New creoles, languages created by mixing parent languages, arose out of African, European, and Native American languages. Christianity was synthesized with African and Native American traditions in order to attract both to Christianity. In some countries African deities were included with saints. In other parts of the Americas, typical West African religious practices such as drumming, dancing, animal sacrifice, spirit possession, and magic were incorporated into Christianity.

Slavery had an important cultural change for gender roles as well. With the rise of slavery in West Africa, the male-female ratio became unbalanced in West Africa. With fewer males in African societies, males began to press for more control. Societies in Sub-Saharan Africa that were traditionally matriarchal, progressively became patriarchal.

<u>Economics</u>
The Columbian Exchange also led to a new economic theory, mercantilism. The goal of mercantilism was the promotion of trade in order to acquire gold and silver, also called bullion. Europeans wanted gold and silver due to economic contention that the prosperity of a nation depended on plentiful supply of bullion. To that end, European countries forced American

colonists to sell their cash crops only to the mother country and expected colonists to buy the cloth and other manufactured goods that were produced in Europe. The production and trade of colonial goods was conducted by joint stock companies (also called trade monopoly companies) that were supported by the government. Investors in European countries organized trade companies such as the British East India Company and Dutch East India Company that were designed to protect and encourage exports.

There were many negative side effects to mercantilism, however. The trade monopoly companies were often abusive to the local populations that they controlled. Large amounts of silver flowing into Europe created inflated prices for nearly all products. Despite the flow of new foods into Europe, many could not afford the products due to price inflation. Mercantilism also angered colonists who were forced to sell their goods for less than they were worth, leading to rebellions in later centuries.

Environment

European colonization and the introduction of European agriculture and settlement practices in the Americas often affected the physical environment through deforestation and soil depletion.