The exploration and subsequent colonization of the lands in the Western Hemisphere by the Spanish and the Portuguese, beginning with Columbus’ voyage in 1492, transformed the world. The original motive for the Iberians to sail across the Pacific was to "find" wealth, specifically a direct trade route to Asia. The conquering of what is now known as Latin America did indeed amplify the wealth of the conquering countries, namely Portugal and Spain. Although much of this accumulation of wealth was gained predominantly through slavery and the devastation of indigenous peoples, the entire Columbian Exchange directly led to the growth of populations worldwide, reformations and innovations in politics, and booming economies.

With the European discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus also came great change and upheaval not solely within the western Hemisphere. The Columbian Exchange “introduced new and useful crops that became of great importance to Africa: here were the African origins of maize, manioc, pineapples and several other valuable foods.”­­­­­­1­­ The conquest of peoples and societies by the Europeans introduced foods that were easily grown and harvested throughout the world. These plants became staple crops of socities worldwide. For example, maize had become so important in southern France in the 1780s that Arthur Young wrote, “Where there is no maize, there are fallows: and where there are fallows, the people starve for want. For the inhabitants of a country to live upon a plant, which is the preparation for wheat, and at the same time to keep their cattle fat upon the leaves of it, is to possess a treasure.”2 Had the western and eastern Hemispheres never come in contact, crops such as manioc, potato, squash, peanuts, avocados, tobacco, papayas, mahogany, rubber, brazilwood, cocoa, tomato, chiles, and beans may not have been introduced to Europe, Asia, and Africa. Ireland would not have the potato, Africa without manioc and maize, and Asia without chiles and certain spices. American foods have had the most significant impact on Africa. No other continent, except the Americas, is more dependent on American crops than Africa even today: out of 640 cultivated plants in Africa, only 50 of them originated in Africa. When looking more closely at the figures, it becomes evident that the course of African food production was directly affected by the crops from the Americas: “about seventy percent of its [South Africa] total crop area is devoted to that American plant.”3 This is a staggering figure considering this staple crop had not existed in Africa before 1492. The exchange of plants greatly turned the tides of history. The abundance of food directly led to population changes. Populations were now sustained and even growing exponentially in some parts. The combination of moving crops to ideal climate zones and an organized system of agriculture also drew in considerable wealth to those in charge of such enterprises. The Spanish and Portuguese, “through the export of sugar and other staples and the generation of capital, had a much more important impact on their respective European home economies than the economically marginal colonies of New France and New England in the north.”4 Horses for transportation and cattle ranching were also introduced to the New World. In addition to boosting overseas populations and wealth, contact between the two hemispheres had also decimated the populations of the American indigenous people. The Europeans unknowingly brought over smallpox (among countless other pathogens) to the native people. It is widely accepted that “population decline amounted to about 90 percent on average, with several Caribbean populations totally wiped out.”5 Syphilis and polio also affected Europeans who immigrated to the New World. It is also apparent that, “very few, aborigines of the New World have crossed the Atlantic to colonize in the Old World, but aborigines of Europe and Africa have crossed by the tens of millions to found nations in the regions of America where their pioneers had done the heroic work of bringing diseases to destroy or reduce the resistance of the native Americans.”6

Along with foodstuffs and disease, people from Africa were also trafficked for the sole purpose of forced labor in what is now known as the Atlantic slave trade. The development was so widespread and detrimental that in 1526, King Afonso I of Kongo deplored the the Portuguese king to eliminate the enslaving of the people: “And we cannot reckon how great the damage is, since the mentioned merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals and our relatives, because the thieves and men of bad conscience grab them wishing to have the things and wares of this Kingdom which they are ambitious of, they grab them and get them to be sold; and so great, Sir, is the corruption and licentiousness that our country is being completely depopulated, and Your Highness should not agree with this nor accept it as in your service. And to avoid it we need from those Kingdoms no more than some priests and a few people to reach in schools, and no other goods except wine and flour for the holy sacrament, That is why we beg of Your Highness to help and assist us in this matter, commanding your factors that they should nor send here either merchants or wares, because it is our will that in these Kingdoms there should not be any trade of slaves nor outlet for them. Concerning what is referred to above, again we beg of Your Highness to agree with it, since otherwise we cannot remedy such an obvious damage, Pray Our Lord in His mercy to have Your Highness under His guard and let you do forever the things of His service, I kiss your hands many times.”7 Since smallpox, among other diseases, had ravaged native populations, the Europeans sought another source of slave labor to fill the void. They turned to Africa. Slave traders would often work in cooperation with local leaders to capture slaves. This was, in part, due to the fact that Africa was not unified by a single dialect, culture, or governing body. There were no allegiances between the many tribes in Africa when the slave trade began. Those who assisted the slave traders did so “without any possible return in interest or in the enlargement of their economic system”8 mainly because there was no relationship between the different peoples that inhabited Africa. It is also important to note that in response to the labor shortage that disease had caused on the islands, the Iberian-Spanish crown engaged in raids of neighboring islands that ultimately led to the enslavement of about two million islanders within a decade by the Spanish alone.9 The forced and unforced migrations of people post-1492 led to many distinct multiracial groups. The Europeans and Native Americans came to be known as mestizos; Africans and Europeans, mulattoes; and Africans and Amerindians, zambos. This was facilitated due to the fact that, unlike their sergregationist counterpart in the north, the Spanish and Portuguese did not actively seek out and condemn interracial relationships in the New World. This led to a number of distinctly different ethnic groups in the Americas. These groups included but were not limited to mestizos, mulattoes, and zambos.

In Africa, the slave trade “tended to reinforce the conservative aspects of African political organization.”8 In other words, the European presence in Africa strengthened the powers already in place and stagnated the growth of African political reform. Whether done intentionally or unintentionally it is never confirmed. It becomes evident that this development further justifies the prejudices of racial superiority in the eyes of some Europeans. As the “technological gap” between continents increased, so did European sentiment regarding the African and Native Americans as primitive savages. Also, from the perspective of the European Christian, slavery had introduced Christianity to the slaves and, therefore, the Europeans had saved them from damnation. Much of the ethnic divisions and conflict were directly caused by the European presence and direct involvement on the African continent. Practically all territorial lines in Africa were drawn up by Europeans claming a stake in the land. This, in turn, confined entirely different, and sometimes hostile, groups within the same region. Pagden writes that the Europeans had devastating effects in Africa by “drawing boundary lines around the territories of a number of different and sometimes hostile groups, sometimes through either forced or voluntary migration.”10 Even more recent conflicts like the Boer War and the Congo Wars clearly illustrate this damaging effect that the European presence had on the continent.

The subjugation of Africans and Amerindians affected global change in countless ways. It rationalized slavery in racist terms, and white supremacy often was more of a motive for slavery than the maximization of profits.11 The slave trade only amplified the sense of imbalance, inequity, and division among different peoples. This is exemplified in militant groups like the Black Panther Party movement if the 1960s and 1970s and white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. The Atlantic slave trade in Africa and conquest of the Americas produced a sense of racial superiority that exists even today. It can even be argued that the slave trade has lasting effects on the psychology of people of African lineage in the Americas. The blacks of the Western hemisphere have higher average blood pressure levels than those in Africa.12

It is evident that the conquering of land and people by the Portuguese and the Spanish was originally fueled by a desire to amass wealth. Slavery and the coerced labor of indigenes was a means to an end for these empires as opposed to an end in itself. The fact that Africans were predominantly used in the Americas for slave labor was not racially motivated at first. Since the native populations of Latin America were rapidly declining from disease and the European workforce lacking in numbers, Africans were logically the most viable option for slavery. The driving force behind the slave trade was simply wealth, which in Europe meant power to expand territories. Prior to widespread slavery in the Americas, Columbus states that upon his return trip to the Americas he wishes to “find a barrel of gold, for which these people I am leaving will have traded, and that they will have found the gold mine, and the spices, and in such quantities”13 that the profits could be used to conquer Jerusalem.

Much is made of the slave trade and the heinous acts against humanity committed in the process. However, this development opened to doors to an increasingly shrinking world. With access to large amounts of precious metals, the Europeans had now become much more mobile.14 Also, navigation brought peoples of the world closer. What lie on the other side of the Atlantic was no longer a mystery and for the first time in human history, was it possible to get to practically all regions of the world. One can make the general assumption that world populations would be dramatically different than what they are today had the Columbus Exchange never happened. It would also be safe to speculate that Latin America would consist primarily of Amerindians: predominantly black societies in the Caribbeans would not exist today. Also, much of the civil unrest that pervaded the African continent since the arrival of the Europeans would most likely have been avoided had the Europeans never tried to stake a claim in the land by drawing up arbitrary territorial lines. The French, Dutch, Germans, Spanish, Belgians, Portuguese, Italians, and even the Danes all had at one time or another a stake in the African continent.15

The subjugation of African peoples in the Americas led to public dissent in the form of slave rebellions and abolitionist movements. In contrast, the Europeans continued to force their religious values on blacks and indigenous people and forbade blacks from reading for “Dey thought hit would make de niggers harder to keep slaves, an’ to make dem wuk.” The slave Sarah Wilson goes on to say that, “All de slaves dat I knowed couldn’t read nor write.”16 The ideas of equality and the right to pursue happiness are reinforced during this era. Influential people like William Wilberforce illustrated the concept that there was no level of superiority or inferiority in race and that slavery must be abolished. In a speech at the House of Commons in England, Wilberforce spoke of the injustices endured by slaves. He urged for abolition and paved the way for future human rights and social reform.17 Others like Olaudah Equiano wrote extensively on the violence and mistreatment enslaved peoples faced: “These overseers are indeed for the most part persons of the worst character of any denomination of men in the West Indies. Unfortunately, many humane gentlemen, by not residing on their estates, are obliged to leave the management of them in the hands of these human butchers, who cut and mangle the slaves in a shocking manner on the most trifling occasions, and altogether treat them in every respect like brutes.”18 Among others, Equiano and Wilberforce helped educate the public on the horrors of the slave trade and directly assisted in the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. The initial attempts to shed light on the atrocities of the slave trade inspired countless others to seek personal freedom through the protest of the institution of slavery. Regardless of contributing to more enlightened and less prejudiced thinking, the system furthered the conflict among different ethnic groups in Africa placed Africans “in a new and less favorable perspective.”19

The economies of Europe were directly affected by colonialism overseas. Although the evidence suggests that Spain initially enjoyed a lot of financial gain from the Discovery and the ensuing conquest of the Americas, there were also instances where the Spanish economy suffered. Many modern historians believe that the great influx of American silver into Spain rose prices sooner and faster than the other European nations.20 This resulted in economic decline. Portugal, in stark contrast to Spain, was near financial ruin at the time of the Brazilian conquest. It can be said that, “The colony [Brazil] came to the rescue of the mother country [Portugal] in times of great need.”21 Spain also expanded their territory into what is now the Philippines, named after King Philip. Here the Spanish would continue the practice of placing natives into the “encomienda” system as they had done in Latin America. Mostly, territorial expansion for both Portugal and Spain led to economic growth in their respective mother countries with the exception of a few anomalies.

The decline of populations in the Americas was of epic proportions. The declines were so severe that some island populations were even completely erased. Around 1700, the native populations of Latin America began to recover. One prevailing theory points to the increased mixing of European peoples and Native Americans which developed into higher immunity to smallpox and other diseases. From 1601 to 1700, almost 300,000 Africans were transported to Spanish America.22 In these newly formed colonies, racial segregation between blacks, natives, and Europeans was inherent. The views of most Spanish toward the blacks, especially, were of superiority. The Spanish crown even attempted to segregate the blacks from the Indians to “protect the Indians from exploitation.”23 Regardless, the mixing of people occurred in all parts of the Spanish and Portuguese colonies and populations (including mixed populations) of all involved continued to rise.

The Brazilian population in the centuries that followed colonization was also significantly affected. The predominantly slave population did not experience growth as did Spanish American colonies. Rather, it can be deduced that because the predominantly slave population was male, there were low fertility and high mortality rates. Their native populations initially declined but, like their Spanish counterparts, experienced steady recovery. Europe in the years following overseas colonization in the Americas, experienced much more economic progress and population growth than any other continent.24

The suppression of the Atlantic slave trade led to the economic decline of colonies that utilized slave labor as the major source of work. Eltis states, “The ability of the market sector, fueled with slave labor, to overwhelm and absorb nonmarket activities was severely circumscribed by the termination of the African slave trade.”25 Brazil, for example, experienced noticeable decline in coffee and sugar production in the years following suppression of the trade. The Portuguese also experienced steady economic decline following the termination of the slave trade. Also, suppression brought decline in population due to high male and low female representations in the American plantation colonies.

The Columbian Exchange also deeply affected the manner in which race is viewed in the world today. It began with exaggerated stories of cannibalism and human sacrifice and still exists today in the form of supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. It is explained that “the several European nations, moreover, expressed distaste for deviations from their own norms, and their antipathies deepened in proportion to the magnitude of deviation. Castilian, English, and French peoples depreciated each other, but all made more invidious distinctions between civilized peoples—themselves—who lived in republics under the dominion of legitimate princes and savages or barbarians who subsisted without law and polity. Religion furnished another strong basis for prejudicial distinctions. European Christians contemned pagas—peoples who had never known Christ—and held even stronger dislikes for Jews and Moors—peoples who had rejected Him. Castilians sometimes referred to Jews as ‘mala raza’, a bad or defective race.”26 Some may be more receptive to racist views of European intellectual superiority and progress, while on the opposite end of the spectrum, some may believe that the technological gap between Negroid and Caucasoid peoples was greatly widened because of the enslavement and exploitation of the African people. In either case, the slave trade brought to the forefront issues of race, equality, and freedom like never before. Those like Equiano were partially responsible for less prejudiced thinking while others became increasingly bigoted toward non-whites. Since, the world has been divided over issues of race and equality. Another outcome of Portuguese and Spanish colonialism was, among Africans, “a sense of inferiority and even, here and there, of guilt and shame; and this too, in one or other devious form, still persists.”27 With issues of race being raised, it was the next logical step to question the validity and morality of enslaving other people on the foundation of race. It can be inferred that had the Exchange happened centuries later, civil and human rights movements might not have been underway yet. These civil and human rights movements like those commanded by Malcolm X or Abraham Lincoln eventually led to increased equality between blacks and whites, specifically the United States. Emancipation of slavery in many cases gave blacks an increased sense of cultural identity and confirmation that slavery was an injustice and should not be tolerated. These early freedom fighters were the initial signs of social reform worldwide.

Much is to be said of the impact Portuguese and Spanish colonialism had on the world. Populations in some areas grew exponentially while others plummeted at alarming rates, especially in the 16th century. New crops overseas and increased nutritional intake was largely responsible for the overall world population growth since the days of the Exchange. Slavery came and went like a pestilence that forever changed the landscape of society and politics. Large numbers of people were forcefully displaced and exploited, while other nations financially prospered from this exploitation. It cannot be concluded, however, that the overall effect of Iberian colonialism was either negative or positive. While some experienced misery in being enslaved, others might have benefitted from financial enterprises that arose from the Discovery. The Portuguese and Spanish conquests of Latin America and other lands, such as the Philippines, resulted in improved diets worldwide, changed the economies of the world, and affected politics and philosophy among many other developments. The consequences of the Iberian colonialism reverberate today all over the world and will continue to make a global impression in the future.

Notes

1. Basil Davidson. *The African Slave Trade* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 273.
2. Alfred W. Crosby Jr. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport: Greenwood, 2003), 176.
3. Ibid., 185.
4. Dirk Hoerder. *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millenium* (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 199.
5. Ibid., 189.
6. Crosby, *Columbian Exchange*, 212.
7. Basil Davidson, *The African Past: Chronicles from Antiquity to Modern Times* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), 182.
8. Davidson, *African Slave*, 274.
9. Hoerder, *Cultures in*, 195.
10. Anthony Pagden. *Peoples and Empires: A Short History of European Migration, Exploration, and Conquest, from Greece to the Present* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 160.
11. Walter Rodney. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981), 23.
12. Joseph E. Inikori. *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 339.
13. Christopher Columbus and Robert H. Fuson. *The Log of Christopher Columbus* (Camden: International Marine Publishing, 1987), 157.
14. Pagden, *Peoples and*, 56.
15. Ibid., 150.
16. James Mellon, *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember: An Oral History* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 197.
17. William Wilberforce, “1789 Abolition Speech” (speech, London, May 12, 1789), Truman Library, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/educ/ThemeBook\_Finalpgs6284.pdf.
18. Olaudah Equiano, *Olaudah Equiano: The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 105.
19. Lyle N. McAlister, *Spain and Portugal in the New World: 1492-1700* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 461.
20. Ibid., 475.
21. Ibid., 477.
22. Ibid., 337.
23. Ibid., 338.
24. Crosby, Columbian Exchange, 217.
25. David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 238.
26. McAlister, *Spain and*, 53.
27. Davidson, African Slave, 284.

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