



The Disastrous Effects of Increased Global Interactions c. 1500 to c. 1600

By Sharon Cohen

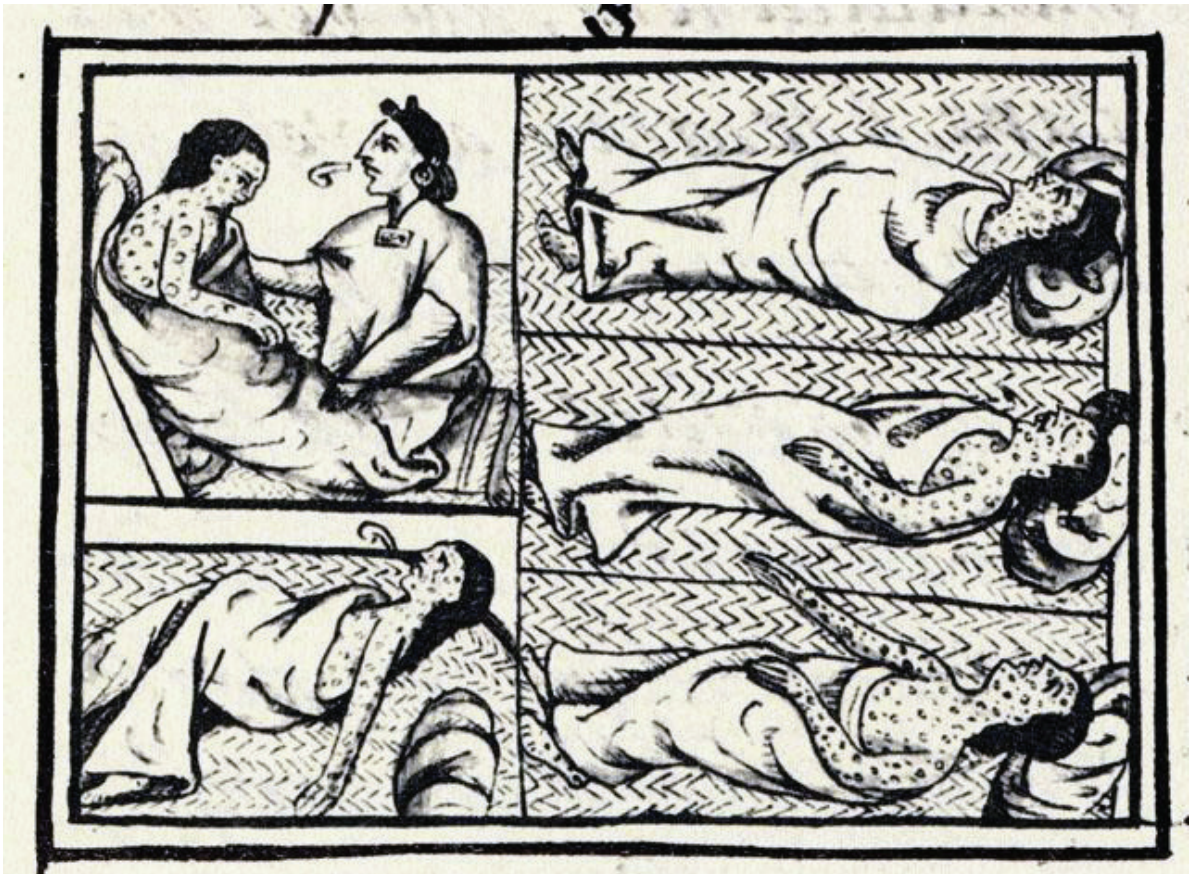
Parts of the world benefitted by increased global networks. But the Atlantic slaving system as well as the sharp decline in indigenous populations were among the devastating effects of this period.

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Demography and the “Great Dying”

How many students are in your school: 500? 1,000? 3,000? Has it always been this size or has it grown or shrunk in recent years? When administrators make decisions about adding a classroom or hiring staff, they use data about the school population size. That’s called demographic analysis. Historians also use demographic analysis to figure out when the size of populations have changed in the past. You’ve learned about how the bubonic plague in the fourteenth century dramatically decreased the number of people in Afro-Eurasia. A similar drastic decline happened in the Americas beginning about a century and a half later, which became known as the “Great Dying”.



Anonymous Nahua artists and scribes, “Effects of smallpox”, Florentine Codex (1540-1585) edited by Spanish priest Bernardino de Sahagún (folio 54, Book XII), by Bernardino de Sahagún, public domain.

Demographic changes in the Americas

Most historians agree that the demographic picture of the Americas changed after the initial contact with Columbus and his crew in 1492. Diseases such as measles, smallpox, chicken pox, and influenza that were native to Afro-Eurasia but new to the Americas were the cause. Most Europeans had some resistance to these diseases, and must have carried them when they traveled across the Atlantic. But these germs were a deadly new threat to indigenous Americans, who had not built up a resistance.

What historians *don’t* agree on is how many perished in the pandemics brought by Spaniards. We know it was a 50 to 90 percent decline in population, but that is pretty wide range. With something this devastating, historians really want to get a more specific number. Or at least a more specific percentage. That’s because the major factor in the

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debate is the question of how many people lived in the Americas before 1492. Historians have estimated that the indigenous population of the Americas before 1492 might have been as high as 112 million and as low as 8 million. Pretty big difference, right? It raises a lot of questions about the impact of the European arrival in the Americas. For example, if the Americas had a high indigenous population, it suggests that the societies in the Americas prior to the arrival of Europeans had been large and strong. That would mean the effects of European arrival and conquest were far more dramatic than if European settlers had encountered a much smaller population in 1492 and beyond.

The debate persists. We don't have written records of indigenous population sizes. Researchers have had to rely on the records Europeans created when they came as well as archaeological data on population density in urban and rural settlements—from before the Europeans arrived, of course.

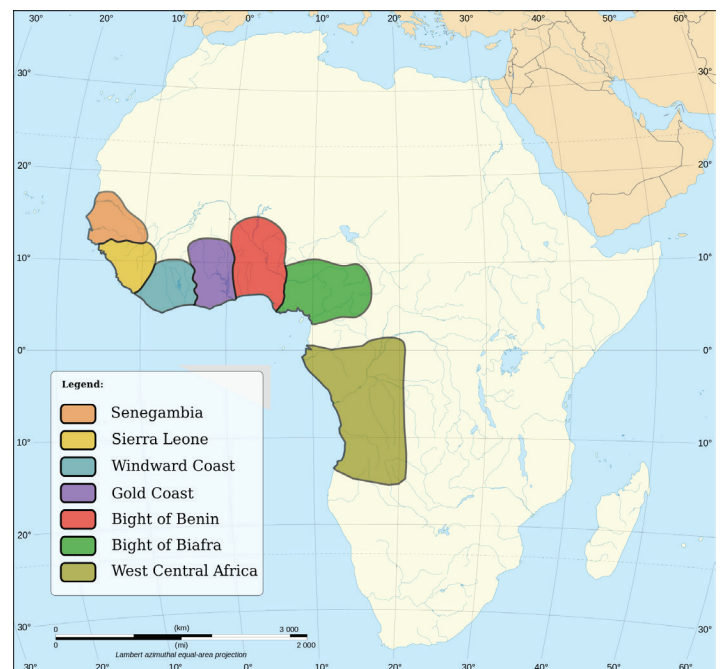
At the same time, an influx of Europeans and Africans after 1492 had the effect of raising the overall population of the Americas. This also led to the creation of new kinds of societies. For some elite Europeans, the migration was temporary, because they weren't looking for a new place to live. They just wanted to make quick money and go back home much wealthier people. Many other Europeans had no choice. Some were sent to the Americas as punishment for crimes and forced to work as indentured servants. In addition, millions of young African men and women were enslaved and transported unwillingly across the Atlantic. The demographic picture of the Americas also changed when Europeans, Africans, and indigenous peoples had children together. These people of mixed heritages were given the labels of "mestizo" and "mulatto" by the Spanish colonial government.

Demographic changes in Africa

The Atlantic slaving system also caused demographic changes in sub-Saharan Africa. According to historian Joseph E. Inikori, the loss of young women and men to the Atlantic slave trade network violently removed millions of productive people from African communities. Added to this, the wars provoked by this system of slaving resulted in many more deaths. Those who survived often could not grow as much food, because they had to live in mountains or swamps in order to escape being enslaved. The toll this stress and difficulty took on women may also have artificially lowered birth-rates as well.

Still, the effects of this slave trade network were not felt in the same way in all parts of Africa, according to historian Walter Rodney. Young Africans captured and enslaved in their homelands were often transferred first to other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. In some cases, populations in these regions actually grew. Some parts of Africa, especially the interior around the African great lakes, also were not heavily affected by the slaving networks.

At the same time, the introduction of new crops brought over from the Americas, such as cassava and maize, contributed to higher birth rates in West Africa. Yet the



Map of the main regions of Africa that participated in the Atlantic slave trade network. By Eric Gaba, CC BY-SA 3.0

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effects of new crops on African population sizes are still debated. In some regions, especially where the Atlantic slaving system was limited in effect, populations may have risen. Historians are working to determine the overall impact of the Atlantic slave trade on the population of Africa, but some data suggests that the population of Africa from 1650 to 1850 declined overall. Certainly, these events left lasting harm on *many* cultures and economies across the continent.

Sugarcane and the “Plantation Complex”

Millions of enslaved Africans were brought to the Americas as forced laborers in what is known as the *plantation complex*. This was the system of large farming estates Europeans created for commercial agriculture in the Americas. The idea for these plantations came from the Madeira Islands off the North African coast in the 1420s. Portuguese settlers got rich exporting sugar from the islands to Europe. Between 1455 and 1510 sugar production on the Madeira Islands more than doubled. It seemed a profitable business model, so Spanish and Portuguese entrepreneurs brought the plantation system to their Caribbean and Brazilian colonies. This transformed the physical environment, demography, and cultures in the Americas. Dramatically.

Sugarcane actually originated in Papua New Guinea, not Madeira, and was brought to Europe by Arab merchants around the ninth century. By the fifteenth century, sugar was one of the most desired commodities in Europe. So much so that when Christopher Columbus set sail in 1492 to search for a new route to Asia, he took sugarcane plants from his mother-in-law’s plantation in the Madeira Islands. Though he failed to reach Asia, he did start his own sugar plantation in the Caribbean using enslaved indigenous people as his workers.

Columbus’s sugar plantation was the first of many established by Europeans. Everyone wanted in on this trade. The success of American plantations, however, came to depend on a steady supply of enslaved people from Africa rather than indigenous people. You will learn more about the horrific experiences of enslaved peoples in the Atlantic slave trade network later in this era.



“[The Mill Yard](#)” painting by William Clark depicts a sugarcane plantation in the Caribbean, 1823. By William Clark, CC0.

The effects of forced labor on sugar plantations

Both male and female enslaved people were forced to do the work under harsh conditions. They planted, harvested, and processed the sugar cane into crystalized sugar and molasses. Working from sunrise to sunset, they cut the tough stalks with sharp machetes. Sugar mill workers were required to work throughout the night, because the cut sugar cane had to be pressed as quickly as possible. These enslaved people could only grow food for themselves at night or on Sunday. A higher percentage of the enslaved were men although enslaved women did similar fieldwork. All of this work was solely to maximize profits for Europeans.

Plantations owners used excessive and cruel punishment of enslaved peoples, for example, putting an iron mask on them that prevented eating. The enslaved Africans also were dehumanized, since they and their children were considered property, and could be inherited through wills. They had to go to church services on Sunday led by an approved priest. Some of the enslaved Africans were Muslims or had polytheistic beliefs, which often weren't compatible with European Christianity. The enslaved people also couldn't leave the plantations without permission and weren't allowed to marry.

In addition to all of these restrictions, enslavement was lifelong unless the owner manumitted (freed) them. The working and living conditions on the plantations were so atrocious that the death rate increased due to avoidable illnesses like blindness, abdominal swelling, bowed legs, and skin lesions. And yet, an enslaved person suffering from one of these conditions didn't get the day off. They were worked to death. The increased death rate meant a steady demand for more enslaved Africans to be transported across the Atlantic Ocean to make sugar in the Americas.

Thus, demographic changes in both the Americas and Africa were mostly disastrous for indigenous peoples. European economies and communities were the ones that mostly benefitted from their arrival in the Americas and from the Atlantic slave trade network. The growth of some populations and decrease of others would have long repercussions for these regions.

Sharon Cohen

Sharon Cohen teaches world history in suburban Maryland. She served on the AP World History Development Committee from 2002 to 2015, wrote the *Teacher's Guide for AP World History* and edited *Special Focus on Teaching About Latin America and Africa in the Twentieth Century (2008)*. She helped found the online journal *World History Connected* and received the 2015 Pioneer in World History from the World History Association.

Image credits

Cover: Engraving shows the arrival of a Dutch slave ship with a group of African slaves for sale, Jamestown, Virginia, 1619. © Hulton Archive/Getty Images

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