

A Grossly Unequal “Exchange”: Looting, Slavery and Capitalism Transform the World

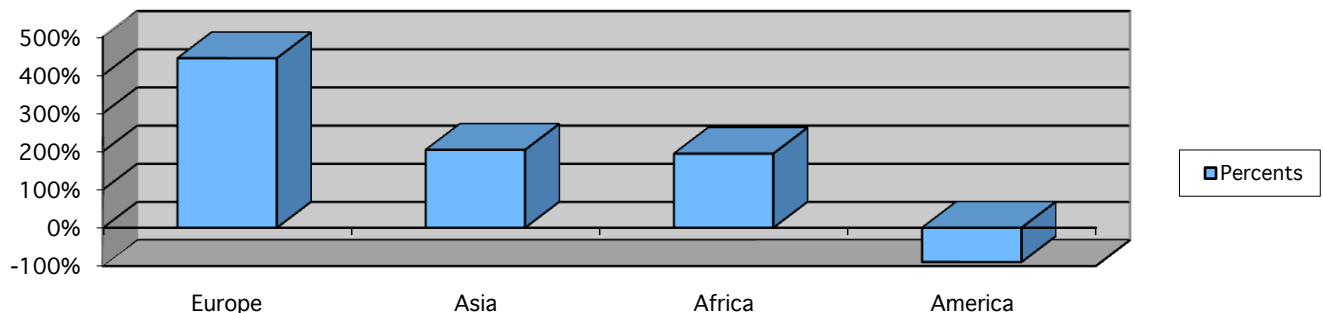
by Alan Singer (catajs@hofstra.edu)

The voyage of Christopher Columbus from Spain to the Caribbean in 1492 set in motion forces that transformed the world. As the nations of Western Europe competed for trade and colonies, they used the labor of enslaved Africans, the indigenous population of the Western Hemisphere and indentured Europeans, the resources and land of the Americas, and trade with East Asia, to amass a level and concentration of wealth previously unknown in the world. The investment of this wealth in building the physical infrastructure of European nations, in military might, in new world plantations, in creating commercial and banking networks, and later in new technologies and industries, was an essential element in the nascent industrial revolution in Great Britain and eventually led to European global domination. A major factor in the global transformation was the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which was dominated in different periods by Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, England and North Americans from the United States. Between 1600 and the 1860s, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade provided between nine and eleven million (records are incomplete and estimates vary) enslaved African workers who produced valuable cash crops, principally sugar, but also tobacco, indigo, rice and later cotton, on new world plantations. This vast forced migration changed the demographic and cultural patterns of the world and provided the profits that financed industrial capitalism. An essential question that can be examined with students is “Would the industrial development of Europe and the United States have proceeded in the same way without the profits from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the products produced by the labor of enslaved Africans?”

The charts and graphs in this article examine the impact of this grossly unequal “exchange” on the peoples of Americas, Africa and Europe. For the Native American population, the Colombian Exchange was devastating. Document A shows population change following the Colombian Exchange between 1500 and 1900 for the native population of each continent. In the Americas, the population of Native Peoples declined by approximately 90%. According to Document B, between 1500 and 1600, the population of Mexico and Central America (roughly the Aztec domains) declined from 15 million to 1.5 million and the population of the Andes people (Inca Empire) declined from 9 million to 1 million.

A. Population Changes, Native Population by Continent, 1500-1900

Source: Hawke and Davis(1992). Seeds of Change (Addison-Wesley), p. 34.



B. Estimated Population of the Americas, 1500 and 1600

	1500	1600
Total	50,000,000	8,000,000

Mexico and Central America	15,000,000	1,500,000
Andes	9,000,000	1,000,000

The Colombian Exchange had a different, though also devastating, impact on the people of western Africa. An estimated 13 million Africans were shipped to the New World from coastal slave ports. Millions of others died in tribal warfare stimulated by the demand for slaves, during raids, while being transporting to the coast, or when left behind in decimated communities. According to *The Slave Trade* by Hugh Thomas (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997), approximately 3 million people from Congo and Angola, and two million each from Senegambia-Sierra Leone, the region around Dahomey and the region near Benin, made the Trans-Atlantic voyage bound in chains beneath the deck of slave ships. The largest group, four million people, were shipped to Brazil.

C. Origin of Enslaved Africans	
Departure	Number
Congo / Angola	3,000,000
Senegambia / Sierra Leone	2,000,000
Slave Coast (Dahomey)	2,000,000
Benin / Calabar	2,000,000
Gold Coast (Ashanti)	1,500,000
Mozambique / Madagascar	1,000,000
Loango	750,000
Windward Coast	250,000
Ivory Coast	250,000
Cameroons/Gabon	250,000
Total leaving African ports	13,000,000

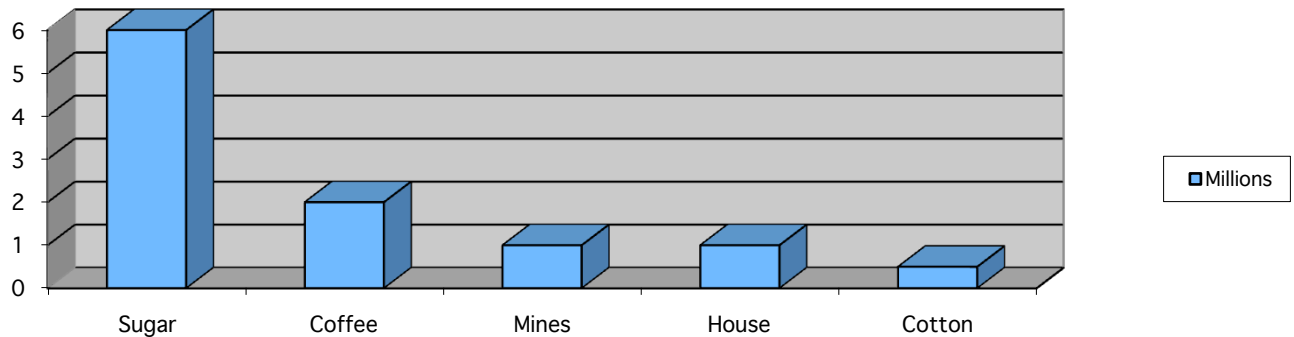
D. Slave Trading Nations		
Slave Traders	Voyages	Number
Port./Brazil	30,000	4,650,000
Britain	12,000	2,600,000
Spain / Cuba	4,000	1,600,000
France	4,200	1,250,000
Netherlands	2,000	500,000
British NA including U.S.	1,500	300,000
Denmark	250	50,000
Other	250	50,000
Estimated transported	54,200	11,000,000

E. Delivery of African	
Arrival	Number
Brazil	4,000,000
Spanish Empire	2,500,000
British West Indies (W.I.)	2,000,000
French W.I.	1,600,000
British NA including U.S.	500,000
Dutch W.I.	500,000
Europe	200,000
Danish W.I.	28,000
Total arriving New World	11,328,000

Once in the Americas, Africans provided the labor that made possible the development of cash crop plantation economies and high profits, capital accumulation and the development of industrial infrastructure for European nations. By far, the most important cash crop was sugar cane.

F. Initial Employment New World Slave Labor

Source: Hugh Thomas (1997). *The Slave Trade*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 804-805.



European nations profited from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, from sugar production and from the growth of new industries to feed the overseas markets (Documents G-J). Between 1761 and 1807, British ships made 5,693 slave trading voyages, land over 1.4 million enslaved Africans at an average price of £42 each and an average profit of 9.5%. Between 1673 and 1800, the enslaved African population of Jamaica, a British colony, grew from 40,000 people to 337,000. By 1800, they operated 800 sugar mills producing 70,000 tons of sugar that was valued at £3.8 million. At the same time, British manufacturing exports to the Americas and Africa increased in value over 750% between 1699 and 1774. In 1770, indirect profits from the Triangular Trade between Britain, Africa and the Americas were roughly equal in value to the combined profits from the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade and plantation production. These charts are from *The Making of New World Slavery, From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* by Robin Blackburn (New York: Verso, 1997).

G. Volume and Profitability of British Slave Trade, 1761-1807 (510)

Years	Voyages	Slaves Landed	Average Price	Profit	% profit
1761-70	1368	284,834	£29	£548,769	8.2%
1771-80	1080	233,042	£35	£714,484	12.1%
1781-90	998	294,865	£36	£848,129	10.7%
1791-1800	1341	393,404	£50	£1,897,234	13.0%
1801-07	906	217,556	£60	£363,060	3.3%
Aggregates	5693	1,428,701	£42	£4,371,676	9.5%

H. Jamaican Economy and Population, 1673-1800 (405)

	1700	1734	1750	1774	1789	1800
Europeans	7,000	8,000	9,000	19,000	23,000	27,000
Africans	40,000	80,000	122,000	190,000	256,000	337,000
Sugar Mills	150	300	525	775	710	800
Sugar, Tons	5,000	16,000	20,000	40,000	50,000	70,000
Exports	£325,000	£625,000	£1,025,000	£2,400,000	--	£3,854,000

I. Exports of Manufactures from England (519)

Annual Average	Continental Europe	Ireland	America/Africa	Asia
1699-1701	£3,201,000	£86,000	£475,000	£111,000
1772-1774	£3,617,000	£499,000	£3,681,000	£690,000

J. British Profits from Triangular Trade, 1770 (541)

Direct Profits		Indirect Profits	
Plantation Profits	£1,307,000	West Indian Trade	£1,075,000
Slave Trade Profits	£115,000	African Trade	£300,000
Sub-Total	£1,422,000	Sub-Total	£1,375,000

This new wealth fundamentally transformed European society (Documents K-M). Population nearly doubled between 1700 and 1800. Internal European trade flourished, financing was available for scores of new projects and capital formation skyrocketed. One of the most striking changes was in Amsterdam and the Netherlands where slave trade profits supported population growth and paid for the construction of canals and dikes and the reclaiming of previously flooded land that doubled the size of the country.

K. Estimated 18th Century European Population Growth, in millions (381)

	England/Wales	France	Spain	Portugal	Total Europe
1700	5.8	20	7.5	1.7	100
1800	9.1	27	11.5	3.4	190
% change	+56%	+35%	+53%	+100%	+90%

L. European International Trade, 1720-1800 (381)

Country	1720	1750	1780	1800
Britain	£13,000,000	£21,000,000	£23,000,000	£67,000,000
Germany	£8,000,000	£15,000,000	£20,000,000	£36,000,000
France	£7,000,000	£13,000,000	£22,000,000	£31,000,000
Total Europe	£62,000,000	£103,000,000	£137,000,000	£228,000,000

M. Slave Trade Profits Helped Pay for the Growth of Amsterdam

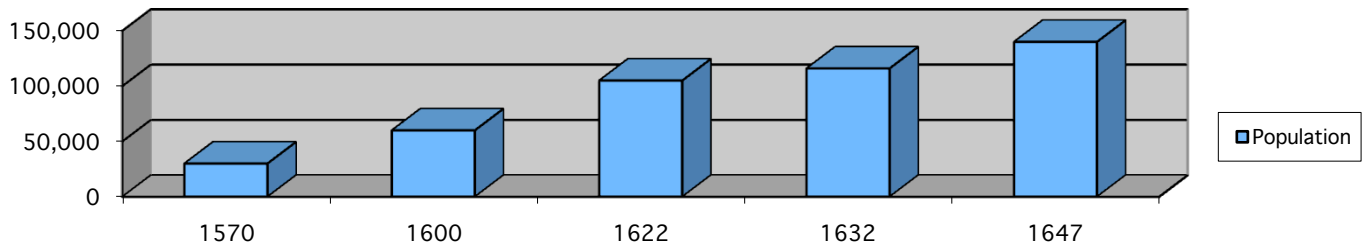


Amsterdam's 17th century canals both channeled flood waters and provided a transportation network.



Once dikes were built, picturesque Dutch windmills pumped water off of previously flooded land.

N. Population Growth in 16th century Amsterdam



O. Land Reclamation in the United Provinces, 1565-1689

