

Charles C. Mann, in *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created* (698pp, Borzoi, 2011) reminds us that international exchange, along the Silk Road from the Orient to Europe and back, and across the Mediterranean and Aegean seas, had been ongoing for 1,000 years before Columbus.

Yet it was his voyages that began globalization as we know it – the routine exchange among all continents of people, plants and animals, diseases, goods and services – often with devastating results, sooner or later, for host countries. Gains were diffuse and world wide, but the pain, local and intense.

Before Columbus, Africans lived in Africa, Asians in Asia, Europeans in Europe. After Columbus, exchanges occurred everywhere. Between 1500 and 1840, 11.7 million African slaves came to the Americas, as compared to a third as many Europeans. So the Americas were more an extension of Africa than Europe, until the late 19th century. It was Africans who shaped the country, and when Europeans became the majority they didn't realize they followed trails Africans had blazed. "Slavery was the foundational institution of the modern Americas."

In Mexico, the conquistador Hernan Cortez had thousands of indigenous slaves, but since they had never renounced Christianity, it was considered unchristian to enslave them. Cortez therefore imported the first ever African slaves to the Americas. Soon Mexicans were trying to categorize a dizzying mix of races – African, Indian,

European, Asian, in a hopeless attempt to get a handle on racial purity.

It was almost certainly an African, not Balboa, who first sighted the Pacific. When Spaniards discovered huge deposits of silver in Peru, they began trade with China, through the Philippines, with ingots going to China and silk, porcelain and Chinese and Malay slaves coming to the West, to join African and indigenous slaves in the mines and in transporting the silver across the pestilent Isthmus of Panama.

In the era of the Homogenocene – i.e., the ongoing homogenization of the gene pool, world wide, from 1493 to the present – exchanged microorganisms, like diseases, sometimes trumped exchanged humans. England, for instance, sent 7,000 folks to Virginia from 1607 – 1624, and 8 of 10 of them soon died, most of malaria, from England, or Yellow fever, from Africa. And since Africans were generally immune, England imported slaves in ever growing numbers to do the work susceptible colonists couldn't. Meanwhile European diseases wiped out three quarters of the Americas' very large native population. Of the survivors, thousands were sent as slaves to Europe and the Caribbean.

Malaria helped Americans win the Revolutionary War, by killing off so many English troops. Later it killed more Union Troops during the Civil War than Confederate guns did.

Columbus re-knit the super continent Pangaea, from which all our continents came. Species separated when it split were re-introduced, deliberately or accidentally, on both sides of the “Columbian Exchange.”

China, for instance, successfully kept foreigners out for centuries – but not plants. Lacking sufficient land suitable for growing rice, she imported potatoes, sweet potatoes and corn from the Americas. Since these would grow on relatively dry uplands where rice wouldn't, they allowed China to become the most populous nation on earth – and left a legacy of erosion and lost topsoil.

By the 16th century American beans, potatoes and corn began to fill European fields. Potatoes, Mann says, fueled the rise of the West. When sugar, tobacco and rubber went global, slaves were imported to tend them, usually by absentee owners, and monocropping, with its attendant degradation of the environment, became widespread.

Plant-related insects and diseases also crossed to new lands – potato blight, the boll weevil, Dutch elm disease – to name just a few.

Columbus, not admired now, alone of all humans “inaugurated a new era in the history of life.” He didn't discover a new world – he created one.