

Continuity and Change from c. 1450 to c. 1750

*The seams of [the world] were closing, drawn together by
the sailmaker's needle.*

—Alfred Crosby, historian who identified the Columbian Exchange, 1986

Essential Question: How did economic developments from 1450 to 1750 affect social structures over time?

By 1750, most of the world was integrated within a system of economic, political, and cultural connections. Better technology enabled the Eastern and Western hemispheres to connect. Meanwhile, Western European maritime powers created trading empires in the Indian Ocean trading network and in the Americas. Religions and other cultural practices continued to spread as a result of these interactions, but they also were transformed as new or syncretic forms developed. Coercive labor systems continued to exist in this newly connected world. However, new forms developed as new economic systems sought to exploit natural resources and to generate wealth for Western European nations.

Transoceanic Travel and Trade

The most significant change to the global economy in this period was the integration of the Western Hemisphere into the global trading network. This change resulted from Western European states wanting to find a sea route to Asia. They borrowed and developed technology that made ocean travel easier:

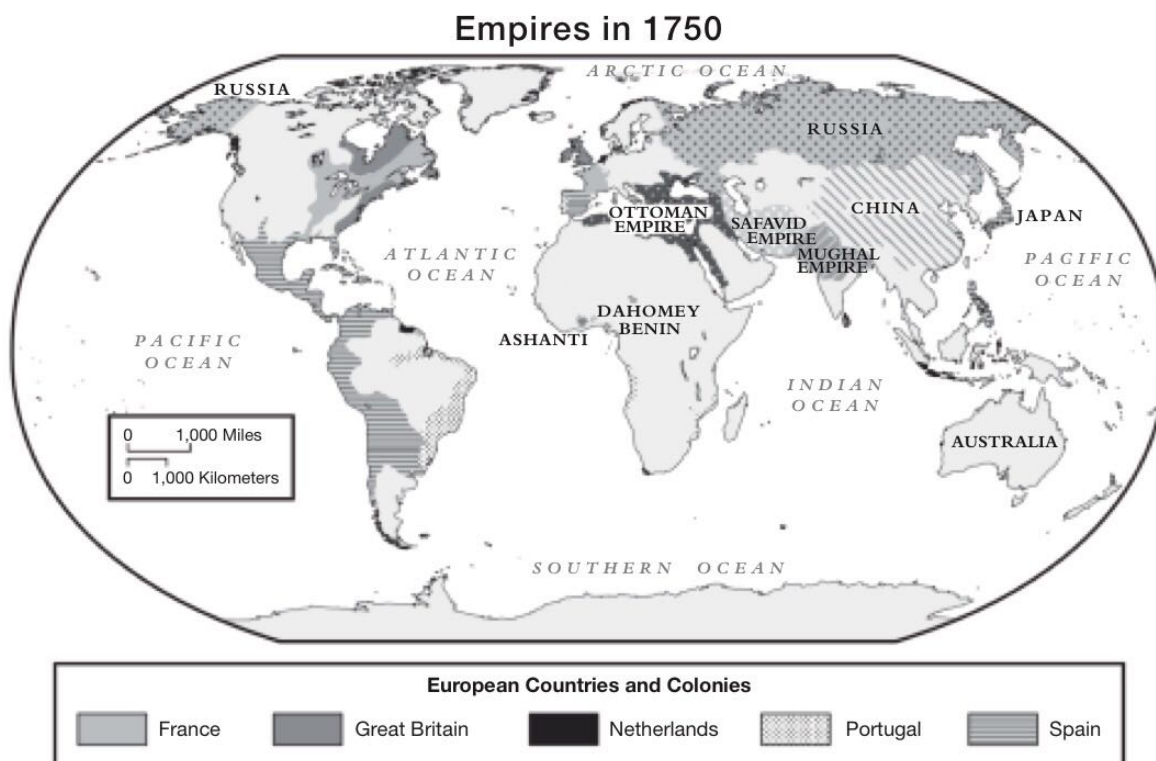
- astronomical charts
- astrolabe
- compass
- magnetic compass
- lateen sail
- carrack
- caravel
- fluyt



The result was the Columbian Exchange: a biological exchange of crops, animals, people, and diseases between the Eastern and Western Hemisphere. The Columbian Exchange had wide-ranging effects on both hemispheres.

The Atlantic System The Columbian Exchange also caused the development of a transoceanic trading network called the Atlantic System. The Atlantic System was made up of the regions of Western Europe, Western Africa, and the Americas and involved the movement of goods and people among those regions. Columbian Exchange forever changed who grew what foods where and how they grew them. It also unleashed deadly diseases on populations that had no immunity to them. In addition, it led to massive migrations, many of them forced, and new social structures.

As people migrated or were forced to migrate within the Atlantic System, cultural changes occurred. For instance, religion spread and often created syncretic belief systems and practices.



Economic Changes

European transoceanic voyages resulted in the integration of the Western Hemisphere within the global trading network. This integration had profound effects on the global economy. Maritime trading empires emerged, led by the Portuguese and followed by the Dutch and the English. As a result, Europeans established trading ports and cities along the coasts of Africa and the Indian Ocean. This brought Europeans into contact—and often into conflict—with existing merchant networks.

One consequence of this contact and conflict was that Europeans came to dominate global trade at the expense of Arab, Indian, and Chinese merchants.



Europeans, then, made considerable profits from transporting the goods from one region to another. (Connect: Identify the differences between the Atlantic System and trade on the Indian Ocean. See Topic 2.3.)

Colonies in the Americas In contrast to the trading empires in the Indian Ocean, Spain created an empire in the Americas. Soon Portugal, England, France, and the Netherlands established colonies there. The discovery of large deposits of silver in Spain's colonies helped further integrate Europeans into the global economy. Asian markets and merchants, especially in China, desired silver. Shipments of silver to Asia from the Americas became a regular feature of the global trade network and helped finance the increasing volume of trade between Asia and Europe. Some experts estimate that the amount of silver in the global economy tripled in the 16th century.

Mercantilism and Capitalism European rulers soon came to see the benefits of encouraging the expansion of trade, as the wealth that could be amassed was considerable. To ensure they participated in wealth accumulation from trade, many European monarchs devised mercantilist economic policies that would provide the ruler with a steady stream of income. While expanded international trade continued to be an important goal of European monarchs, mercantilism eventually gave way to capitalism as the predominant economic system in the new global economy. Investors formed joint-stock companies, also called chartered companies, so they could share the risks and rewards of global trading opportunities.

Effects of the New Global Economy

The new global flow of goods and profits produced some significant benefits. The flow of wealth into Europe helped to expand the middle class and provided the capital that would lead to the Industrial Revolution. However, the huge amounts of gold and silver flowing into Spain and China from the Americas also produced negative economic effects. In particular, the increase in the quantity of money in circulation caused inflation.



Source: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Wikimedia Commons
Rembrandt, The Syndics of the Amsterdam Drapers' Guild, 1662. This shows a group of Dutch officials evaluating a carpet from Persia.

As a result of the activities of European merchants, regional markets in Europe, Africa, and Asia continued to prosper. Funding for the arts increased as merchants and governments used their rising profits and revenue to sponsor artists and authors. Some rulers used their sponsorship of the arts to produce art and architecture that helped to legitimize their rule. Other art symbolized the growing importance of global trade.

Demand for Labor Intensifies

The new global economy also brought about significant disruptions. The Columbian Exchange and the Atlantic System caused a demographic shift in Africa as the Atlantic slave trade intensified. Slavers captured and sold millions of African men. These African men ended up on American plantations, producing cash crops that included sugar, cotton, and tobacco. As a result, some African communities experienced a gender imbalance. Africa's population declined because of the Atlantic slave trade. Eventually, the population increased as people grew new crops, such as manioc.

Traditional forced labor systems, such as serfdom, continued in areas of Afro-Eurasia. However, other coerced labor systems developed in the Americas as a result of the Columbian Exchange and the Atlantic System, in addition to the chattel slavery of the Atlantic slave trade. Many European settlers first arrived in the Americas as indentured servants, contracted to work for a period of time before they were free to pursue other jobs or occupations. The *encomienda* and *hacienda* systems, as well as the adoption of the Inca *mit'a* system, are examples of other coerced labor systems in the Spanish American colonies.

New Social Structures As Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans coexisted in the new American colonies, the social structures of the Americas changed. New social systems appeared that were based on racial or ethnic identity. This division led to a rigid and hierarchial society, with white Europeans or Americans of European descent possessing the majority of wealth and political power. A new subculture appeared that consisted of people who were of mixed European and African heritage. Societal conflicts eventually led to revolutions.