

• Advanced Critical Reading – Columbian Exchange

The Columbian Exchange was the “exchange of plants, animals, foods, human populations (including slaves) communicable diseases, and ideas between the Eastern and Western hemispheres that occurred after 1492,” according to Wikipedia. The term “Columbian Exchange,” coined in 1972 by historian Alfred Crosby, took hold and became not only standard shorthand for the phenomenon which it exemplified, but also a perspective for witnessing societal and ecological events.

When Christopher Columbus made landfall with his crew in the Bahamas in October 1492, two worlds with separate evolutionary histories met. When Europeans began to settle America’s east coast, they brought with them and cultivated familiar crops – wheat and apples – as well as familiar weeds, such as dandelion and chickweed. In the 1600s, they introduced cattle and horses, which flourished in the New World climate.

Devastating diseases were introduced to the American population which had no resistance to them. John R. McNeill, professor of history at Georgetown University, points out that “when the first inhabitants of the Americas arrived across the Bering land bridge between 20,000 and 12,000 years ago, they brought few diseases with them ... they had no domesticated animals, the original source of human diseases such as smallpox and measles. In addition, as they passed from Siberia to North America, the first Americans had spent many years in extreme cold, which eliminated many of the disease-causing agents that might have traveled with them.” Consequently, between 1492 and 1650, over 90% of the Native American population died in epidemic after epidemic of smallpox, measles, mumps, whooping cough, influenza, chicken pox, and typhus. The loss of labor caused by pathogens indirectly led to the establishment of African slavery among European immigrants in the Americas, resulting in the importation of malaria and yellow fever from Africa, causing even more destruction of the Native American population.

The export of American flora and fauna did not revolutionize the Old World as the influx of European agriculture altered the New World ecosystem. According to Crosby, “the New World’s great contribution to the Old is in crop plants. ... Maize, white potatoes, sweet potatoes, various squashes, chiles, and manioc” augmented and invigorated the European cuisine. Very few New World creatures traversed the ocean — the muskrat, the gray squirrel, and a few others, but they did not precipitate large scale changes in Old World ecosystems.

Although some diseases made the ocean voyage from New World to Old, they did not have appreciable effects on the European population. Crosby stated that, although some deaths were attributed to ailments from America, “the total is insignificant compared to Native American losses to smallpox alone.”

In Crosby’s original work, he eschewed ideological statements. He reminded his readers that neither the Old nor New World was inferior or superior to the other; the encounter between two worlds was fundamentally an exchange. By 1988, he summarized his long view of the encounter in this way: “My point is ... that the impact of the Encounter is so massive that we should consider it with the same sense of scale as we do events connected with the endings and beginnings of the geological periods and eras and their influence on the direction of evolution on the planet.”

Questions

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1. Which of the following best describes the author's view of the Columbian Exchange?
 - I) Neither the Old World nor the New World was superior to the other.
 - II) The New World experienced the brunt of the encounter between the Old and New Worlds.
 - III) The encounter between the Old and New Worlds was fundamentally an even exchange.
 - A) I only
 - B) II only
 - C) III only
 - D) I and II only
 - E) II and III only

2. It can be inferred from the passage that
 - A) Slaves brought to America from Africa had more resistance to European diseases than Native Americans did.
 - B) New World creatures were unable to thrive in the climate of the Old World.
 - C) New World pathogens had no effect on the people of the Old World.
 - D) Most human diseases were introduced to humans by animal populations.
 - E) Europeans had more resistance to European diseases than Africans did.

3. In line 34, *eschewed* most closely means
 - A) espoused
 - B) avoided
 - C) employed
 - D) created
 - E) discovered

Answers and Explanations

1. The correct answer is **D**.

- D) Correct. In lines 34–35, “In Crosby’s original work, he eschewed ideological statements. He reminded his readers that neither the Old nor New World was inferior or superior to the other; ...”
- II) Correct. According to lines 12–13. “Devastating diseases were introduced to the American population which had no resistance to them.” According to lines 19–23, “between 1492 and 1650, over 90% of the Native American population died in epidemic after epidemic of smallpox, measles, mumps, whooping cough, influenza, chicken pox, and typhus. The loss of labor caused by pathogens indirectly led to the establishment of African slavery among European immigrants in the Americas, resulting in the importation of malaria and yellow fever from Africa, causing even more destruction of the Native American population.” And in lines 30–34, “Although some diseases made the ocean voyage from New World to Old, they did not have appreciable effects on the European population. Crosby stated that, although some deaths were attributed to ailments from America, ‘the total is insignificant compared to Native American losses to smallpox alone.’”
- III) Incorrect. According to lines 35–36, “the encounter between two worlds was fundamentally an exchange.” However, it is not stated that the exchange was an *even* exchange.

2. The correct answer is **A**.

- A) Correct. According to lines 19–20, “...between 1492 and 1650, over 90% of the Native American population died in epidemic after epidemic of smallpox, measles, mumps, whooping cough, influenza, chicken pox, and typhus.” This shows that Native Americans had little resistance to European diseases. According to lines 21–22, “The loss of labor caused by pathogens indirectly led to the establishment of African slavery among European immigrants in the Americas, resulting in the importation of malaria and yellow fever from Africa, causing even more destruction of the Native American population.” Since the African slaves were able to work in conditions which caused over 90% of the Native American population to die, the African slaves must have had more resistance to European diseases than the Native Americans did.
- B) Incorrect. According to lines 27–29, “Very few New World creatures traversed the ocean — the muskrat, the gray squirrel, and a few others, but they did not precipitate large scale changes in Old World ecosystems.” This shows that the animals traveled to the Old World and, since they did not make large-scale changes, probably made small-scale changes in Old World ecosystems. Had they not thrived, they would not have made any changes in the Old World ecosystems at all.
- C) Incorrect. According to lines 31–33, “Crosby stated that, although some deaths were attributed to ailments from America, ‘the total is insignificant compared to Native American losses to smallpox alone.’” So it is not correct that New World pathogens had *no* effect on the people of the Old World.
- D) Incorrect. It is not possible to determine from this reading whether most human diseases were introduced animal populations. The statement in lines 15–16 that “they had no domesticated animals, the original source of human diseases *such as smallpox and measles*” does not establish that *most* human diseases were introduced by animal populations.

E) Incorrect. It is not possible to determine from this reading whether Europeans had more resistance to European diseases than Africans did. The statement “The loss of labor caused by pathogens indirectly led to the establishment of African slavery among European immigrants in the Americas, resulting in the importation of malaria and yellow fever from Africa, causing even more destruction of the Native American population” does not establish that either Europeans or Africans had more resistance to European diseases.

3. The correct answer is **B**.

- A) Incorrect. He did not espouse or adopt ideological statements, which are statements of a specific doctrine or ideology. Rather, as pointed out in lines 34–35, “he reminded his readers that neither the Old nor New World was inferior or superior to the other.”
- B) Correct. He eschewed or avoided ideological statements, which are statements of a specific doctrine or ideology. As pointed out in lines 34–35, “he reminded his readers that neither the Old nor New World was inferior or superior to the other.”
- C) Incorrect. He did not employ or use ideological statements, which are statements of a specific doctrine or ideology. Rather, as pointed out in lines 34–35, “he reminded his readers that neither the Old nor New World was inferior or superior to the other.”
- D) Incorrect. He did not create or invent ideological statements, which are statements of a specific doctrine or ideology. Rather, as pointed out in lines 34–35, “he reminded his readers that neither the Old nor New World was inferior or superior to the other.”
- E) Incorrect. He did not discover ideological statements, which are statements of a specific doctrine or ideology. Rather, as pointed out in lines 34–35, “he reminded his readers that neither the Old nor New World was inferior or superior to the other.” Instead, as pointed out in lines 36–40, “he summarized his long view of the encounter in this way: “My point is ... that the impact of the Encounter is so massive that we should consider it with the same sense of scale as we do events connected with the endings and beginnings of the geological periods and eras and their influence on the direction of evolution on the planet.””