

The Empire Strikes Back at Itself

anon.

1993

Media hoopla commemorating the Quincentennial of Christopher Columbus's first voyage to the New World, however sanitized, should have convinced anyone paying attention that the Spanish conquest was a disaster for both Native Americans and Africans.

Newspaper, magazine, and television celebrations of the 1492 "discovery" have paid scant attention, however, to its effects on Europeans themselves. The unspoken assumption is that the Americans' and Africans' loss must have been Europeans' gain, that all that misery, destruction, and death in the New World must have benefited people in the Old.

The opposite is true. Ordinary Europeans suffered terribly, and for centuries, from the conquest and the military arms race, inflation, and falling living standards that Europeanization of the Americas touched off.

Spain was in the grip of a tiny ruling class of royalty, Catholic Church hierarchy, and landed aristocracy. Two to three per cent of the population owned 97 per cent of the land in Castile, Spain's heartland. The great landowners had no incentive to modernize Spain. They just wanted to raise more sheep and sell more wool. The environmental degradation that overgrazing vast numbers of sheep entailed seems to have bothered the ruling class no more than did the cutting of forests for timber to build ships and provide charcoal to smelt domestic Spanish silver ore. And so what if the wool went to Holland to be manufactured into cloth rather than being processed in Spain itself.

Meanwhile, successes in the New World swelled the Spanish monarchy's ambitions in the Old. The bonanza of bullion from the Americas encouraged Spain's rulers to build up their army into Europe's largest military force, setting off an arms race that forced rivals to multiply their armed forces as well. Spain hired German, Italian, and Irish mercenaries and built and bought a vast fleet of heavily armed ships. Hegemonic wars against the French, Dutch, and English followed.

The most lasting and far-reaching effect of the increase of money in circulation was to set off a long wave of inflation that spread throughout Western Europe. To be sure, debasement of coinage by monarchs in search of additional royal-revenue contributed to the run-up in prices, as did deficit spending on unproductive armies, navies and wars. So did the pressure of growing populations on scarce resources and lagging production of goods. But the trigger was the 20-percent increase in Europe's stock of gold by 1660 and the tripling of its silver supply.

By 1600, prices had risen fivefold in Andalusia, two-and-a-half-fold in France, and fourfold in England, without anything like a comparable increase in wages. Before long, English carpenters and masons had to work four times as long to buy a loaf of bread, and their real wages did not return to the pre-1540 level until 1880. As British historian John Burnett recounts in *A History of the Cost of Living*, inflation created "a new category of the poor—those who had employment but whose wages were inadequate to support life at a reasonable level." The deterioration continued for centuries; in 1850 one of every seven persons in England and Wales was still a pauper.

—reprinted from *The Progressive*

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Fifth Estate #341, Spring 1993

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