Commerce, Agriculture, and Slavery: Crash Course European History #8

Crash Course: European History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=mU2dhPlJWyY
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/mU2dhPlJWyY

Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So, last time, we were focusing on queens and kings and rivalries. Today we're gonna take a break from struggles over religion and political disputes that made for so much violence and look instead at some basics of everyday life--the foods people ate centuries ago, the kinds of things people bought and sold, and changes in the kinds of lives people could hope to live.

I know developments in agriculture and commerce may seem like sidelines to the main political show—I mean, there's a reason it's called Game of Thrones and not like, Game of Slightly Improved Seed Quality--but I'd argue that history is about how people lived, and what we might learn from their lives. And if you think about our lives today, our leaders are important. Our forms of government are important.

But as Miroslav Volf said, Politics touches everything, but politics isn't everything. On a day-to-day basis, our lives are also shaped by the kinds of goods and services available to us, and our professional and personal opportunities. Whether you go to school, whether you get enough to eat, the kinds of freedom you do and do not enjoy... those are the big questions we're exploring today.

INTRO The citizens of many European nations today have long life expectancies, and a top standard of living. Europe also comprises the largest developed economic market place and a major region of trade. But in 1500, that was hardly the case.

In the early fourteenth century a major famine erupted, with further famines across the centuries. We've talked about the Black Death. Trade was local and regulated by guilds—that is, by organizations of individual artisans and traders that determined the number and type of goods that could be produced and marketed.

In the late middle ages Europe was a subsistence economy, with little if any agricultural surplus. If princes could satisfy their appetite for food and drink on a regular and reliable basis, they were virtually alone in experiencing a consistently happy and full stomach. In 1500, Europe was not exceptional in life expectancy or in many other measures of well-being.

But in the early modern period, roughly between 1500 and 1750 the situation gradually improved,. And I know that seems impossible, given all the religious strife, and wars, and massacres we've discussed in this series so far. But during this period, population actually rose; In Britain, for instance, the population almost doubled between 1700 and 1800.

Historians attribute this rise to developments in agriculture, sometimes called an agricultural revolution that unfolded alongside all that warfare. And there was also a growth in commerce, often called a commercial revolution, and of course, the Columbian exchange, which made new nutritious foods--from potatoes to corn--available to Europeans. But the agricultural revolution was also driven by innovation that dramatically boosted agricultural yields in Europe between 1500 and 1800.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble. For starters, it was discovered that planting certain crops, like turnip and clover, could replenish soil, which was one example of crop rotation--farmers would plant one crop in a field one year, and then another the next year, rotating 2 or at times three crops to add nutrients to the soil. and the great thing about crop rotation is that it decreased the amount of farmland that needed to remain fallow each year--that is, unplanted. Secondly, with the Dutch pioneering some advances, land reclamation occurred across Europe.

This entailed converting marshes and other previously unusable land into farmland. and Third, common lands were enclosed. Enclosure occurred when wealthier farmers bought up or simply took common land (land that had been open to community use). Private farms were able to innovate faster than communities, which required consensus in group decision-making.

And fourth, there were new inventions such as the seed drill and a plow that could be drawn by two instead of six or eight farm animals. The new plow cut down on expenses and the seed drill made planting more accurate with less wasted seed. Both of these new tools, by the way, copied Chinese inventions.

But while enclosure and more mechanized farming practices did mean more overall food, and therefore more overall wealth, not everyone benefited, because a decrease in common land meant that fewer people had direct access to land for their own use. Thanks, Thought Bubble. So one example of all these innovations can be seen in the life of [[

TV: Elizabeth of Sutherland]] Elizabeth, Countess of Sutherland, who inherited some 800,000 acres in Scotland. Stan, hold on a second. Is that a trout in her hair? Is is a feather? Was there some kind of hair fish trend at the time? Let's move on from lighthearted hair fish jokes and talk about people being wrested from their land. So, Elizabeth removed hundreds of tenants from her estate, then created unified acreage for farming and raising sheep with the help of day laborers. These landless workers were cheaper, and also unlike the tenant farmers who had lived on the land previously, day laborers did not have longstanding claims to inhabit and work the land, called "tenancy." The Countess was known for chasing villagers away from their land with her own hands, and also for innovations that increased productivity even as Sutherland's former tenants became homeless. So more overall food, but on land controlled by fewer people. So obviously, this Agricultural Revolution entailed massive social dislocation that included the rise of poverty, migration of disenfranchised farmworkers to cities and also to other continents, and even as overall agricultural production rose, some among the poor starved. And this period of European history is still widely debated in part because ideas of private property and inequality of wealth remain resonant today, but whether this modernization helped or hurt humanity again depends on your perspective. To some, it was fatal. To many, it meant trauma and impoverishment as people were removed from lands their families had farmed for generations. But these changes also helped fuel greater overall food production, population growth, larger cities, and more space for all kinds of specialized labor, from shoemaking to theater. I mean, it's no coincidence that Shakespeare and Marlowe were writing as English agricultural production started to increase. Another ingredient in the rising population and overall output of food was the inflow of novel plants from the Americas and other parts of the world. Potatoes and maize, for example, were grown on the marginal land that was previously seen as unfit for agriculture. Farmers started experimenting with all the new crops, but especially with maize and potatoes that could produce super-abundant...did the world just open? Is there a potato in the center? There's a lot of candidates for most important plant of the last 500 years, but I'm gonna say it's the potato. They contain lots of carbohydrates, and whatever micronutrients are. You can turn them into both French fries and tater tots, the world's two most important foods. But most importantly, you don't need great soil to have great potatoes. Just ask Idaho! [[

TV: Rice]] In addition to the transfer of crops, knowledge about agriculture was transferred from Africa and the Americas to Europe. Women in both the Americas and Africa had made their regions food-rich, as European traders and invaders testified, and their knowledge of crops and irrigation techniques allowed, for instance, rice to be grown in much larger quantities in European colonies. [[

TV: Slave Trade]] Much of what Europeans learned about agriculture from Africans came from enslaved women agriculturalists. Slavery has existed for millennia, but slaves have experienced very different lives depending on culture, and religion, and occupation, and gender. [[

TV: Slaves at Work]] Before 1650, the Atlantic slave ships took an annual total of 7,500 Africans to the Western Hemisphere—and that number was comparable to other slave routes, such as the one in South Asia or the Ottoman Empire. The vast majority went to Mexico and South America. European ships transported other slaves from the Indian Ocean across the Pacific, many of them to Mexico. But, beginning in the late seventeenth century, there was a massive upsurge in African slavery that sought to replace the labor of the native American populations that had been utterly devastated by disease and warfare. In particular, slave labor was used to fill the world's increasing demand for commodities and consumer goods. Europeans came to depend on sugar, and tobacco, and coffee, and tea--all of which was produced primarily via forced labor. [[

TV: Mansa Musa]] And racism developed alongside the growth of the African slave trade. At first, Europeans were in awe of African wealth in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as it motivated their first contacts. They craved African gold and found African men and women stately--"intelligent and rich," as one Portuguese trader wrote. However, greed for profit took over and as the indigenous Amerindian population declined, the desire for slaves grew, and to justify slavery, European descriptions of Africans became contemptuous and dehumanizing. [[

TV: Slave Ship]] As dehumanization progressed, Europeans treated Africans as morally and intellectually inferior, and used those incorrect constructions to justify their horrendous treatment of Africans, packing them into slave ships and subjecting them to the lethal middle passage across the Atlantic. African kings and independent African traders fed the rising demand for slaves. In those days of state consolidation African rulers sought funds for weaponry, which Europeans provided in exchange for slaves. More advanced weaponry then allowed leaders to capture additional people to sell to European slavers for yet more weapons. European slavers mostly operated along the West African coast, while Arabs took slaves from East Africa to sell to India or into the Middle Eastern markets. The Saharan slave trade went northward, transporting many women slaves to serve as domestics and as sex workers. But the European slave was by far the largest, and the dehumanizing racism that has endured to this day. [[

TV: Slaves at Work]] In the eighteenth century, one million slaves worked in the sugar industry and diamond and gold mines of Brazil. These industries were tremendously lucrative, and in that sense, slavery both produced and was a product of growing European wealth. The conditions of slavery were truly dire: Torture, beatings, overwork, and malnutrition were routine. And because the system itself did not treat them as humans, enslaved people had very little recourse, and there was always the knowledge that you could be separated from your children, from your family, at any time, because you were treated legally and practically as property. The slave trade itself was part of a web of interactions that is still being understood. Historians used to talk of the triangle trade: shippers took small iron goods from Britain to Africa, trading them for slaves; and then shippers dropped off the slaves who survived the passage in Brazil or the Caribbean, and then filled their holds with local sugar or molasses to take back to England. But while there was a triangle, there were also many other shapes. West African rulers and consumers wanted cowrie shells and Indian textiles as payment for slaves. These products took a much more circuitous route than a simple triangle. Cowrie shells, for example, were picked up from merchants along the Pacific Ocean or South Asian coasts, then "cured" and processed in Sri Lanka, then shipped again. With slaves coming to the New World across the Pacific and commodities to pay for them flowing in multiple directions, the slave trade into the Americas was part of a global, not just triangular, market. In fact, multidirectional trade in many goods increased in diversity and quantity. In the seventeenth century literally millions of pieces of porcelain went in Portuguese ships to Dutch and other European ports. And to get funds to buy that porcelain, European shippers did a lot of local coastline shipping, stopping at ports around the Indian Ocean or at Chinese depots in the Philippines. European consumers snapped up goods and merchants grew wealthy. The increase in consumption was truly unprecedented: For example, in 1660 the East India Company imported 23 pounds of tea to Britain; in 1750 it imported five million pounds. [missing text] [[

TV: Indiaman]] Besides slavery and colonization, innovation was also an important facilitator of economic growth. And I don't just mean innovation in terms of actual things, I also mean innovation in terms of ideas...like corporations! The East India companies such as those founded in Britain, the Netherlands, and France focused each kingdom's international trade and raised funds for investment. Joint stock companies arose to finance merchant ships. The development of double entry bookkeeping gave merchants and bankers a better idea of inflows and expenditures. However, there wouldn't be laws limiting liability of such companies until much later. So, a ship lost at sea could still mean the investors' loss of homes and possessions. Whereas now, when investors do things that lose money, we just give them their money back. And talking of bankers brings us to the Fuggers, or Fuggers. The Fugger family of bankers, who once loaned money to monarchs such as Charles V and Philip II of Spain, who then spent everything on defeating Protestants, the monarchy's bankruptcy made the bankers penniless too. This whirl of commerce disrupted society by producing new values and creating new groups of wealthy, influential people. Almost everywhere in Europe, people who weren't aristocrats became rich from global expansion of trade. Many of the aristocrats also became richer, of course, but the wealth of new groups of people upset long-held notions about the importance of family lineage. And capitalism--that is, the private ownership of enterprises--changed everyday values and turned activities toward making profit above all else. Capitalism created a new class of wealthy traders and merchants, who competed for political influence with those from hereditary status groups such as the nobility. We'll hear more, of course, about the twists and turns of capitalism across the centuries. But by the beginning of the eighteenth century capitalism was in a lively stage of development, thanks to the abundance provided by the agricultural and commercial revolutions and also by the Atlantic slave trade, which wrenched some eleven to twelve million Africans from their homes and families. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.