

Western Expansion And The Growth Of Capitalism In Europe

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Introduction

The expansion of Western European power from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries and the growth of capitalism were interconnected developments. Maritime exploration opened routes to the Americas, Africa, and Asia; colonial governments claimed land and labor; merchants accumulated capital through trade; states protected chartered companies; and new financial institutions made large ventures easier to organize. These developments increased the circulation of goods, information, and artistic forms, but they also depended heavily on conquest, coerced labor, enslavement, and unequal exchange. A balanced assessment must therefore avoid presenting European expansion as either an uncomplicated story of progress or a process that produced no constructive change at all.

This essay draws on at least four primary sources: Christopher Columbus's 1493 letter describing his first voyage; selections from the *Florentine Codex*, compiled in the sixteenth century from Nahua testimony and images; Bartolomé de las Casas's *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*; Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*; and the 1788 diagram of the slave ship *Brookes*. Together, these sources reveal the optimism, commercial ambition, cultural documentation, moral protest, and human violence that accompanied Western expansion. The most positive consequence was the creation of wider networks for knowledge, exchange, and institutional innovation. The most negative was the conversion of human beings, land, and ecosystems into objects of conquest and profit. (Columbus)

European Expansion and the Commercial Transformation

European overseas expansion occurred within a longer transformation of agriculture, commerce, state finance, and manufacturing. Growing towns increased demand for food and raw materials. Merchants developed bills of exchange, insurance, joint-stock arrangements, and long-distance partnerships to spread risk. Monarchies sought customs revenue and strategic advantage. Improvements in navigation and shipbuilding did not make conquest inevitable, but they allowed states and private investors to move people, weapons, and commodities across oceans on an unprecedented scale.

Capitalism did not appear fully formed at one moment. It developed through changing property relations, wage labor, markets, credit, colonial monopolies, plantation production, and the

accumulation of commercial wealth. European states often restricted competition through exclusive charters, navigation laws, and imperial regulation. This combination of private investment and public coercion became one of the defining features of early modern expansion. The history of capitalism is therefore not simply the history of free markets; it also includes state violence, legal privilege, and the seizure of resources.

Primary Source One: Columbus's Letter and the Language of Possession

Christopher Columbus's 1493 letter to his patrons announced the islands he had encountered and described their inhabitants, landscape, and commercial possibilities. The document is a primary source for the mentality of expansion because it joins observation to appropriation. Columbus praises fertile land, harbors, timber, spices, and the possibility of conversion to Christianity. At the same time, he repeatedly treats inhabited places as territories that can be named and claimed for the Spanish Crown.

The letter contains the promise of exchange and geographical knowledge. It brought Europeans information about lands previously unknown to them and encouraged further voyages. Yet its language also exposes the unequal assumptions behind the encounter. Indigenous generosity is interpreted as evidence that people will be easy to govern, convert, or recruit. Their political authority and property systems receive little recognition. The document thus illustrates a central contradiction: exploration enlarged knowledge while imperial possession narrowed the moral status of the people being described.

Primary Source Two: The Florentine Codex as Knowledge and Colonial Encounter

The *Florentine Codex*, also known as the *General History of the Things of New Spain*, was compiled under the direction of the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún with the participation of Nahua elders, scholars, scribes, and artists. Its twelve books record language, religion, social organization, plants, animals, medicine, trade, conquest, and everyday life. The work is valuable because it preserves extensive Nahuatl testimony and Indigenous visual knowledge that might otherwise have been lost. (Sahagún)

The codex represents one positive possibility within cross-cultural contact: collaborative documentation. It is an extraordinary resource for descendants, historians, linguists, and students of Mesoamerica. However, it was produced within colonial rule and missionary objectives. Sahagún sought knowledge partly to understand and replace Indigenous religious practices. The text therefore cannot be described as completely neutral or unaffected by Christianity. Its pages preserve Nahua

perspectives while also revealing the pressure of conquest, translation, censorship, and evangelization.

The book on the Spanish conquest is especially important because Indigenous witnesses describe fear, violence, disease, and political disruption from perspectives often absent from European triumphal accounts. The codex demonstrates that colonial knowledge could preserve culture and facilitate domination at the same time. This ambiguity is more historically accurate than presenting Western expansion only as cultural destruction or only as intellectual discovery.

Primary Source Three: Las Casas and Moral Opposition from Within Europe

Bartolomé de las Casas's *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, published in 1552, condemned the brutality committed by Spanish colonists against Indigenous communities. Las Casas describes massacres, forced labor, torture, hunger, and depopulation. His language is intentionally emotional because he sought reform from the Crown and wanted Christian readers to recognize the contradiction between evangelization and cruelty. (Las Casas)

As a primary source, the work has limitations. Las Casas sometimes uses rhetorical exaggeration, and his purpose was polemical rather than statistically precise. Nevertheless, the abuses he denounced are supported by broader evidence concerning conquest, forced labor, and demographic catastrophe. His testimony matters because it proves that imperial violence was not morally invisible in its own time. Europeans debated the rights of Indigenous peoples, the legitimacy of conquest, and the obligations of rulers.

This internal criticism is a positive development in the history of political thought, but it should not be used to excuse the colonial system. Reformers often remained committed to conversion and imperial sovereignty. Las Casas challenged extreme violence without fully escaping the paternal assumptions of his age. Still, his writing became part of a tradition that insisted that power must be judged by universal moral standards.

Primary Source Four: The *Brookes* Diagram and the Economics of Enslavement

The 1788 diagram of the British slave ship *Brookes* shows enslaved Africans arranged in tightly measured rows below deck. Abolitionists circulated the image to make the spatial violence of the Middle Passage visible. Its geometric order resembles a technical plan, yet the bodies represented were people kidnapped, purchased, confined, and transported as commodities.

The diagram demonstrates the most destructive connection between expansion and capitalism.

Plantation economies in the Americas produced sugar, tobacco, cotton, coffee, and other commodities for distant markets. European merchants, insurers, shipbuilders, manufacturers, and governments profited from the traffic. The system generated wealth, but the wealth cannot be separated from racial slavery and the legal conversion of persons into property.

The image also shows how quantitative reasoning can serve opposite moral purposes. Traders calculated how many captives could be carried for maximum return. Abolitionists used the same dimensions to expose inhumanity. Capitalist organization increased efficiency, but efficiency did not guarantee justice. The ethical value of an economic system depends on the rights it recognizes and the human costs it permits.

Primary Source Five: Adam Smith on Commerce, Monopoly, and Colonial Policy

Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, offers a primary source for emerging political economy. Smith explains how specialization, exchange, and the division of labor can increase productivity. His famous pin-factory example shows that coordinated tasks can produce far more than isolated labor. This insight helps explain one positive aspect of capitalist development: markets and specialization can expand output, lower some costs, and create new occupations.

Smith was also a critic of monopoly and colonial privilege. He argued that exclusive trading companies and mercantilist restrictions benefited particular merchants at the expense of the wider public. His discussion complicates the idea that capitalism and empire were identical. Commercial society could encourage innovation and interdependence, while imperial monopolies distorted competition and directed state power toward private enrichment.

Smith's analysis does not fully account for the violence of slavery or colonial dispossession, and industrial growth later created harsh factory conditions. Yet his criticism of monopoly remains relevant. The positive potential of markets depends on law, competition, public institutions, and restraints on concentrated power. Without those conditions, wealth can accumulate while social costs are shifted onto workers and colonized peoples.

Art, Architecture, and the Display of Power

Western expansion and capitalist growth transformed artistic patronage. Churches, monarchies, merchants, and colonial elites commissioned architecture, sculpture, paintings, maps, scientific illustrations, furniture, metalwork, and textiles. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's design for St. Peter's Square demonstrates how Baroque space could communicate welcome, movement, and institutional authority. The embracing colonnades guide crowds while magnifying the ceremonial power of the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation. (Bernini)

Artistic achievement is a genuine positive legacy. Expanded trade made new pigments, materials, images, and techniques available. Museums and archives now preserve objects that support education and comparative study. Nevertheless, collections also contain works obtained through colonial warfare, coercive excavation, unequal purchase, or the removal of sacred objects. A modern appreciation of artistic innovation should therefore include questions of provenance, ownership, and restitution.

Positive Consequences: Exchange, Knowledge, and Institutional Innovation

The most defensible positive effects of expansion and capitalist growth were not conquest itself but the networks and institutions that emerged around global contact. Crops, medical knowledge, navigational information, printing, scientific observation, and artistic forms circulated more widely. Credit and corporate organization enabled projects beyond the resources of a single household. Urban growth created new professional and educational communities. Political economy produced concepts for analyzing labor, prices, taxation, and monopoly.

These gains were unevenly distributed, and many were shaped by Indigenous, African, Asian, and European contributions rather than created by Europe alone. Maize, potatoes, tomatoes, and other American crops affected food systems across continents. African agricultural and metallurgical knowledge sustained colonial economies. Translators and local informants made European scholarship possible. Calling the result “Western progress” without recognizing these contributors repeats the exclusions of imperial history.

Negative Consequences: Dispossession, Slavery, and Ecological Extraction

The greatest negative consequence was the creation of systems that treated conquest and profit as sufficient justification for domination. Indigenous lands were claimed through doctrines that ignored existing sovereignty. Enslaved Africans supplied labor for plantation economies. Colonial administrations reorganized taxation and production around foreign markets. Epidemics caused enormous mortality, while warfare and forced migration intensified social collapse.

Environmental damage also followed commercial extraction. Forests were cleared for plantations and ships, mines transformed landscapes, and monoculture reduced ecological resilience. The costs of production were often imposed on people who had little political voice. Monopoly power allowed companies and elites to control labor markets and influence governments. These patterns show that economic growth can coexist with declining freedom and security for those who bear its costs.

A Balanced Historical Judgment

It is possible to acknowledge scientific, artistic, and institutional achievements without treating empire as their necessary or moral cause. Knowledge exchange did not require enslavement. Commercial innovation did not require the destruction of Indigenous sovereignty. Art could flourish without colonial seizure. The historical task is to separate constructive human creativity from the structures of coercion that often financed or directed it.

The primary sources make this balance possible. Columbus reveals ambition and appropriation; the *Florentine Codex* preserves Indigenous knowledge within a colonial framework; Las Casas documents moral opposition to abuse; the *Brookes* diagram exposes people reduced to cargo; and Smith identifies both productive specialization and the dangers of monopoly. Read together, they prevent a one-sided narrative.

Conclusion

Western expansion and the growth of capitalism transformed Europe and connected distant societies through trade, migration, conquest, and communication. Their positive effects included broader knowledge networks, new forms of organization, increased production, and significant artistic and scientific exchange. Their negative effects were deeper and often catastrophic: dispossession, racial slavery, coerced labor, monopoly, cultural disruption, and environmental extraction. The primary-source record demonstrates that contemporaries experienced and debated these contradictions. A responsible judgment recognizes that the most valuable achievements came from human exchange and creativity, while the greatest harms came from denying equal rights to the people whose labor, land, and knowledge made expansion profitable.

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