**Did the Age of Exploration bring more harm than good?**

*From the 15th century, European navigators sailed in search of new routes, lands and opportunities for trade and exploitation, spreading and gaining knowledge, and transforming the lives of peoples they encountered. Here, as America celebrates Columbus Day – a US holiday that commemorates the landing of Christopher Columbus in the Americas in 1492 – six historians debate whether we should celebrate or condemn these trailblazers...*

**HISTORIAN 1: Margaret Small: “The Age of Exploration paved the way for the globalised economies we see today”**

For the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, the potential benefits of contact with other peoples were far outweighed by the brutality of European conquest and colonisation, and the ravages of European diseases that cut a swathe through the populations. The experiences of the Taino of Hispaniola and the Beothuk of Newfoundland painfully demonstrate the harm brought about by the Age of Exploration: both were among the peoples the Europeans first encountered in the Americas, and both are now extinct. We have yet to even fully understand what was lost in this devastation.

This era also saw large-scale European involvement in the slave trade. By 1820, it’s thought that more than 10 million west Africans had found themselves unwilling slaves in the Americas. Their own societies were destabilised and depopulated. For them, the Age of Exploration undoubtedly brought more harm than good.

For many Europeans, the answer was more often favourable. Europe was able to establish vast trading companies that frequently tapped into local trade systems and created a global commodities network. Conquest and colonisation drew wealth and power into the European sphere, allowing that region to assume a position of global dominance. In the process, Europe became richer than it had ever been before. Even some of the flora and fauna exchanged proved hugely profitable for Europe. Though the potato later became associated with the catastrophic Irish famine in the 1840s, the introduction of that one crop alone helped Europe sustain a huge labour force in the face of a massive population growth in the 18th century.

Considering the issue from a global perspective rather than a regional one, it becomes more of a philosophical question. The Age of Exploration provided opportunities for societies and cultures to interact; it brought all parts of the world into contact with each other, paving the way for the globalised economies we see today; it enabled a knowledge network to extend across the whole globe. In a sense, our modern world is built on the back of the changes introduced by the European Age of Exploration – so it becomes a question of judgement on the modern world.

**HISTORIAN 2: François Soyer: “The Portuguese took the decisive first steps in the creation of a lasting European stranglehold on world trade”**

As the first monarchy to send explorers beyond the geographical limits of Europe, Portugal can claim the title of initiator of the so-called Age of Exploration. From 1415, Portuguese merchants and mariners explored the coasts of western Africa, reaching the Cape of Good Hope in the 1480s. Seeking to establish direct trade links with Asia, in 1497 a fleet under the command of Vasco da Gama sailed around the Cape to India, followed by yearly expeditions. From 1497 to 1510, the Portuguese established supremacy in the Indian Ocean, in the face of stiff opposition from Muslim and Hindu rivals. In 1500, the expedition of Pedro Álvares Cabral was blown off course on its way to India and reached the shores of Brazil.

The impact of the Portuguese Age of Discovery on modern world history cannot be overstated. On an economic level, it initiated a revolution in world trade. Spices and other Asian goods that had previously transited to Europe via the Islamic world were now directly imported by Portuguese (and later by Dutch and British) ships. To this was later added the lucrative flow of sugar and diamonds from Brazil. The Portuguese thus took the decisive first steps in the creation of a lasting European stranglehold on world trade. In turn, this ensured European economic prosperity and global political hegemony until the 20th century.

But the human toll was very heavy. The Portuguese position in Asia was precarious and dependent upon the calculated use of military force and violence against competitors – for example, the slaughter of the Muslim population of Goa. Most importantly, the Portuguese initiated the transatlantic slave trade. The Portuguese and other Europeans oversaw the forced removal of millions of west Africans, and their dispatch to the mines and fields of the Americas – men and women whose blood, sweat and lives contributed to the enrichment of European empires. In the end, the answer to the question of whether the era brought more harm than good depends on whether we approach it from the perspective of the self-proclaimed European explorers or the peoples (Asian, African and American) with whom they came into contact.

**HISTORIAN 3: Graciela Iglesias-Rogers: “Exploring entails entanglements of all sorts; some are desirable, others not”**

In early February this year, scientists announced the discovery of a vast hidden network of towns, farms and highways beneath the trees of a remote Guatemalan jungle. The finding suggests that about 1,200 years ago the region supported a Maya population of up to 20 million people – roughly equivalent to half of Europe’s population at the time. A game-changer for archaeologists, this breakthrough highlights a weakness in the set question: there is no such thing as an ‘Age of Exploration’. It is inherent in human nature to look out into the unknown. This discovery underlines the fact that we have been exploring since time began: the earliest inhabitants of the Americas did it, expanding their territories; the Spanish Conquistadors and later adventurers did it; and humans will continue doing it in the future.

Archaeologists had assumed that Maya cities were isolated and self-sufficient; now it seems that a far more complex, interconnected society flourished. Yet this discovery owes much to the pioneering scientific expeditions of Ramón Ordóñez (1773), José Antonio Calderón (1784), Antonio del Río (1786), Alexander von Humboldt (1803–04), José Luciano Castañeda (1805–07) and, crucially, Juan Galindo (1831–34). Galindo was no great scientist; the Dublin-born son of an English actor, he set off for the Americas to volunteer in the Latin American wars of independence, and became governor of the Guatemalan department of Petén.

Uniquely positioned to navigate through the Hispanic-Anglosphere, his greatest contribution consisted of vivid accounts of Maya ruins, published in London and New York. His reports captured the imaginations of many people, including John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood who, between 1839 and 1842, followed his trail to become founders of Classic Maya studies. Exploring entails entanglements of all sorts; some are desirable, others not. The latest discovery adds credibility to the theory that societal dynamics linked to the depletion of natural resources explain the collapse of the Classic Maya around AD 900. Laser pulse technology, instead of machetes, allowed the stripping away of tree canopy from aerial images to reveal the ancient civilisation underneath, thus proving that exploration and natural and heritage preservation can be compatible activities.

**HISTORIAN 4: Emma Reisz “Disease was largely an accidental means of conquest – but was devastating in its effects”**

During the Age of Exploration, Europeans connected the world into a single navigational system, triggering an era of imperial competition as European states expanded across the globe through trade, colonisation and coercion. This produced many of the global interconnections that underpin the modern world – but these were established at a vast human cost, paid by some populations and not others. Benefits such as access to new foods and luxuries, and to new scientific knowledge, accrued disproportionately (but not exclusively) to Europeans.

Conversely, the harms were mostly experienced by the rest of the world. The slave trade was the most egregious example, enriching Europe and its colonists through the suffering of Africans. Disease was largely an accidental means of conquest but was devastating in its effects, as infections endemic to the Old World ravaged populations in the Americas and Australasia. It was not certain at the start of the 15th century that Europeans would dominate global maritime networks. The expeditions of Chinese admiral Zheng He along the rim of the Indian Ocean (1405–33) had much in common with those of Henry the Navigator on the other side of Afro-Eurasia. When Vasco da Gama arrived in east Africa in 1498, his sailors were mistaken by the locals for Chinese.

By the mid-15th century, though, the Ming court had abandoned maritime expansion, and Chinese proto-colonialism around the Indian Ocean ended. Zheng He’s expeditions had comparatively little impact on world history, whereas the maritime route from Europe to India that da Gama established transformed global trade. Had early globalisation been Sino-European rather than solely European, the ratio of harms to benefits might have been no more equitable for the rest of the world, however. In 1411, Ming forces overthrew the Kotte king in Sri Lanka, and in a c1431–33 inscription Zheng He boasted that “the countries beyond the horizon and from the ends of the earth have all become [Chinese] subjects”. Europeans were not unique in seeking to profit from maritime expansion – though in the early modern world they were uniquely successful in doing so.

**HISTORIAN 5: Glyn Williams: “Pacific islanders adopted new ideas and techniques from European explorers”**

The second Age of Exploration, extending over the long 18th century, was most notable for Europe’s expansion into the Pacific – or, as Alan Moorehead saw it in his influential 1967 book The Fatal Impact, Europe’s ‘invasion’ of the vast ocean and its 25,000 islands. Following the voyages of Cook and his contemporaries in the second half of the 18th century, Tahiti became the geographical and emotional centre of Polynesia, praised by the French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville as “the happy island of Cythera… the true Utopia”. In time, these idyllic impressions were modified as evidence was found throughout the Pacific of human sacrifice, infanticide and cannibalism, and by the end of the century few argued that the islands should be left untouched by European contact.

This came at a cost: the lives of the inhabitants of the Pacific, from Hawaii in the north to New Zealand in the south, were disrupted by the uncontrolled activities of whalers, traders and beachcombers, themselves often the rejects of society. They used the islands for victualling and refitting, using as payment the lethal combination of firearms and liquor. The only protective influence came from missionaries – but their presence, too, had a profound effect on the islands’ traditional societies.

This ‘fatal impact’ thesis has remained compelling, but in recent decades its conclusions have been challenged by scholars – anthropologists as well as historians – working with local rather than European sources. Islanders gradually came to be seen not as helpless victims of technologically superior newcomers but as participants in a process of mutual exploitation. This collaboration was seen most clearly in the emergence of three island kingdoms: Tahiti (ruled by Pomare), Hawaii (ruled by Kamehameha) and Tonga (ruled by Taufa‘ahau). The details of how these centralised kingdoms emerged differ, but each of these rulers used European alliances to strengthen his position. More generally, islanders adopted new ideas and techniques; in renowned New Zealand historian Kerry Howe’s words, they “proved adaptable, resourceful, and resilient”. The arrival of
Europeans marked a turning point in Pacific history but, despite population losses from disease and warfare, it did not have in the long term the catastrophic impact once suggested.

**HISTORIAN 6: Julia McClure: “The idea of the ‘Age of Exploration’ whitewashes history, giving a more noble and scholarly appearance to an age of imperialism”**

This is a trick question. It embeds European explorers between the 15th and 17th centuries in a noble narrative of discovery, giving the false impression that they travelled beyond their localities for the expansion of human knowledge. Columbus’s ‘discovery’ of America in 1492 is often taken as the starting point for the so-called ‘Age of Exploration’ – a point of departure that signposts four ideological problems.

First, taking 1492 as a threshold contributes to the Eurocentric project of modernity that, among other things, overlooks the intellectual vibrancy and transcultural exchanges of the global Middle Ages, from the technological advances of Song-dynasty China to the golden age of Islamic science. Second, the Columbus expedition was not motivated by the expansion of knowledge but by the acquisition of resources – and when the hoped-for riches did not materialise, Conquistadors looked to the people and the natural resources of the Americas as a source of wealth.

Third, the ‘discovery’ of the ‘New World’ did not mark an epistemological rupture; Columbus went to his grave quite unaware that he had stumbled upon a new continent. Many of the ‘explorers’ who followed in his footsteps did not discover something new but, rather, encountered fragmented versions of themselves, their desires and ambitions. The nomenclature of the Americas betrays how late-medieval imaginations ordered the New World: for example, the Amazon took its name from Greek mythology.

Finally, the ‘Age of Exploration’ construct has prioritised European perspectives and knowledge. What of the Amerindians looking back at the Europeans exploring their world? Many aspects of their histories have yet to be told. The idea of the ‘Age of Exploration’ does more harm than good, because it whitewashes history, giving a more noble and scholarly appearance to what was actually an age of imperialism. Europeans may have increased their knowledge of the flora, fauna, and topographies of the world in this period, but they often did so at the expense of indigenous knowledge and value systems. Whatever the orientations of new histories of global knowledge, we must never overlook the critical relationship between knowledge and power.