

After all, the trade had a very high “leakage.” It has been estimated that for every one hundred Africans purchased as slaves in the interior of Africa, fewer than thirty would survive the Atlantic crossing and the first three years on the new continent. Moreover, a fifth of the sailors died in transit.

Surely, using slaves in African colonies would have been more efficient. They would have known the climate, crops, and technology. Slavery itself was a long-standing and widely used institution in Africa. Why then move them to another world?

The answer appears obvious: Europeans already had colonies in the New World and not in Africa. But that situation was as much a result of the slave trade as its cause. Why didn’t Europeans colonize Africa first? After all, Europeans had a much longer acquaintance with Africa. The Saharan trade had provided most of Europe’s gold for hundreds of years. And the first modern European colony on another continent was in Africa’s Ceuta (next to modern-day Morocco), which the Portuguese conquered in 1415. Navigation of African waters was known earlier and better than the seas of the New World. Certainly parts of Africa were appropriate for European exploitation. The first large-scale sugar plantations were built on African São Tomé. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries some 100,000 African slaves worked the fields and refineries, as its *fazendas* became the prototypes for Brazil’s vast export complex (which eventually demanded some 40 percent of the Atlantic slave traffic).

Geography, history, and logic seemed to point to European use of slaves in Africa rather than the building of a new world in the American tropics. Yet that did not occur on any substantial scale until after 1880 when the slave trade was abolished. Why not?

In part, the answer lies in the large states and sophisticated warfare that Africans could use to defend themselves against imperialists. Long enjoying the horse, the wheel, and iron as well as obtaining firearms in trade, African soldiers were virtually on a technological par with Europeans. The cannon gave a slight edge to the northerners, but, as Joseph Conrad poignantly showed in *Heart of Darkness*, cannons could reach only a short way into the continent. Still, this answer does not completely convince. The Aztecs and Incas, whom Europeans did conquer and colonize, had larger states and armies than their African contemporaries. Yet they fell much sooner to the Spanish and Portuguese sword and musket.

Could it be a question of values? Europeans could obtain what they wanted from Africans through trade because of their long-standing commercial intercourse. Amerindians, on the other hand, did not share enough values with Europeans to be interested in many exchanges.

This argument has some merit. Europeans gained the main goods they

sought through trade in Africa. But they failed to open up the continent to trade. West African societies were not monetarized and did not embrace European goods until late in the nineteenth century. Africans didn’t differ much from Amerindians in their indifference to most European goods.

So what is the answer? Why did over 10 million Africans cross the Atlantic? The main reason was disease. Amerindians had no experience with epidemic diseases; they had no immunities. When the Spanish brought smallpox and measles, the Indian armies and empires collapsed. In many places 90 percent of the population died within a few decades of the conquest. The Caribbean was almost entirely devoid of its indigenous inhabitants within half a century. Since there were no native epidemic diseases in the Americas, Spaniards survived much better. But surviving was not the same as prospering. Spaniards and later northern Europeans did not want to work with their hands. Africans came to take their places. Africans had long had contact with European disease because of the active trade between the two continents. Consequently, they were relatively immune to smallpox.

At the same time, disease protected Africa from European colonization. While Africans had developed some immunities to smallpox and measles, malaria, yellow fever, and other indigenous diseases were fatal to Europeans. Consequently, Europeans were loath to establish settlements on the African continent. They remained in small trading enclaves on the coast.

Silver and later sugar and tobacco paid for African slaves and in turn required the slave labor for production. A complementary triangular trade between Africa, North America, and South America arose. It became more profitable—and considerably safer and easier—to ship to the Americas African slaves often entrapped by other Africans than to create colonies in Africa itself. Disease and greed created an African diaspora.

5.2 As Rich as Potosí

Deep in the interior of South America, ten weeks from Lima by mule, stands the 16,000-foot-high Cerro Rico peak, which towers over a bleak, frigid, barren landscape. This was the end of the world, but it became the center of the world. It became a magnet for tens of thousands of people who founded the city of Potosí. The world of colonial South America became irreversibly changed, and the world economy transformed. This remote summit in this harsh land came to affect millions of people and the course of history, because it was a mountain of silver, the richest motherlode ever found.

The Incas had already worked Potosí with their flint picks. They used silver for their temples and jewelry. They were not anxious to share their secret with their Spanish conquerors, but by 1545 the Spanish were aware of the mountain.

