Impact of European Diseases

How many people lived in the Americas when Europeans arrived?

For decades anthropologists and historians accepted the estimate that one million American Indians lived in North America on the eve of European contact. In 1966 anthropologist Henry Dobyns challenged that number and the techniques used to derive it and instead posited that eighteen million people lived here. Why do these population estimates disagree so greatly?

If you were a historian of the time of first contact between American Indians and Europeans, what evidence would you use to estimate Indian population? American Indians practice an oral rather than a written tradition. Without written records left by Indian people, whose documents will you read? Suppose that you comb through archives around the world to read the diaries and chronicles of the European explorers. How accurate will these fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century estimations of Indian populations be? How could Europeans who explored along the coast have any knowledge of the number of peoples living in the interior?

Besides questioning the reliability of early European adventurers’ guesses about the number of Indian people, you must factor in that many of these Europeans encountered Indian people who had already or would soon contract deadly illnesses from the diseases carried by Europeans. Because the native peoples in North and South America had been separated from other peoples for thousands of years, they possessed no immunities to Eastern Hemisphere diseases such as smallpox and measles. Most people have heard about the legendary Black Death (plague) in Europe, but few know about the catastrophic impact of European diseases on American Indians. The Black Death swept through Europe again and again in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Perhaps forty percent of the population died between 1348 and 1377 due to plagues. Among people who had been exposed to smallpox for decades, it continued to kill 3 to 10 percent of the population per year. American Indian peoples, isolated from smallpox, lost one in three people when first exposed to it. Year after year, European diseases attacked Indians. Cortés did not defeat the Aztecs; a smallpox epidemic did. Waves of epidemics killed 10 to 30 percent of Indians each time they swept through an area. Population reductions of from 80 to 100 percent were common in the Americas in the decades after European diseases’ first introduction. Entire cultures, such as the Arawaks who had greeted Columbus in 1492, disappeared. For these reasons, estimates of the Indian population of North America at the time of European arrival remain inexact.

Microbes were not the only items exchanged between the Western ("New World") and Eastern Hemispheres ("Old World"). Corn and potatoes traveled from the Americas east and coffee and sugar came west to the Americas. Soon Europeans brought enslaved Africans to the Americas. We will learn more about these exchanges in later weeks.

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