

## Lecture Two: *The Discovery of America*

### **I. Introduction**

The discovery of America is one of the most significant events in world history. Although **indigenous peoples** had inhabited the continent for thousands of years, the arrival of **European explorers** in the late 15th century marked the beginning of a new era of **global interaction**. This lesson explores the key figures, motivations, and consequences of the European discovery of the Americas. Understanding this event provides insight into the historical foundations of the modern world and the long-lasting effects of European exploration.

#### **1. The World Before Columbus**

Before the arrival of Europeans, America was home to **advanced civilizations** such as the **Maya**, **Aztecs**, and **Incas**. These societies had complex political systems, architectural achievements, and agricultural innovations. The **Maya** developed a sophisticated calendar system and impressive cities, the **Aztecs** built grand pyramids and a powerful empire in central Mexico, and the **Incas** engineered extensive road networks across the Andes. However, due to **geographical isolation**, they had no contact with Europe, Asia, or Africa. This isolation meant that indigenous civilizations evolved independently, creating unique traditions and belief systems that were later disrupted by European **colonization**.

#### **2. Christopher Columbus and the Spanish Expeditions**

**Christopher Columbus**, an Italian explorer sponsored by **Spain**, set sail in 1492 to find a westward route to Asia. Instead, he landed in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492. Columbus's voyages opened the Americas to European exploration and **colonization**. **Spain** quickly established settlements and began extracting resources from the **New World**. Columbus's journey was followed by multiple expeditions, leading to the establishment of Spanish control over large parts of the Americas. Despite initial resistance from indigenous groups, **European powers** imposed their rule through **military conquest** and **strategic**

**alliances**. Columbus made a total of four voyages, each expanding European knowledge of the **New World** and increasing **Spain's** interest in colonial expansion.



Landing of Columbus (One of four scenes of early exploration in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda).

### 3. Other European Explorers

While Columbus is credited with the discovery, other explorers played crucial roles in mapping and conquering the Americas:

- **Amerigo Vespucci (Italy)**: His maps and writings led to the naming of the continent "America." He explored the coast of South America and argued that the land Columbus encountered was a new continent, not part of Asia.
- **John Cabot (England)**: Explored parts of North America in 1497, laying the foundation for future British claims in the region. His voyage marked the beginning of English interest in transatlantic exploration.
- **Hernán Cortés (Spain)**: Conquered the Aztec Empire in 1521 after forming alliances with indigenous groups who opposed Aztec rule. The fall of the **Aztecs** marked the beginning of Spanish dominance in Mesoamerica.
- **Francisco Pizarro (Spain)**: Defeated the Inca Empire in 1533, expanding Spanish control over South America and gaining vast amounts of gold and silver.

#### 4. The Columbian Exchange

The contact between Europe and the Americas led to the **Columbian Exchange**, a massive transfer of **plants**, **animals**, people, and **diseases**. This exchange introduced crops such as potatoes, tomatoes, and maize to Europe, revolutionizing diets and agricultural economies. In return, the Americas received horses, cattle, wheat, and sugarcane, which transformed indigenous lifestyles and food production. However, the most devastating impact came from the introduction of European **diseases** like **smallpox**, **measles**, and **influenza**, which decimated indigenous populations. Some estimates suggest that up to 90% of Native American communities were wiped out due to lack of immunity to these foreign **diseases**.

#### 5. Consequences of the Discovery

The discovery of America had profound and lasting effects on global history:

- **Cultural Impact:** The blending of European, African, and indigenous cultures created new languages, traditions, and social structures. Spanish, Portuguese, English, and French influences reshaped the Americas, while indigenous customs and African heritage contributed to a diverse cultural landscape.
- **Economic Changes:** The discovery fueled European economies through the extraction of gold, silver, and other valuable resources. The development of **transatlantic trade routes** led to the rise of **mercantilism** and strengthened European colonial empires.
- **Political Shifts:** **European powers** competed for control over the **New World**, leading to conflicts, territorial divisions, and the establishment of **colonial governments**. **Spain** and **Portugal** initially dominated, but **France**, **England**, and the **Netherlands** also established their own colonies over time.
- **Indigenous Resistance and Adaptation:** Despite European dominance, indigenous groups resisted **colonization** in various ways. Some fought against European forces, while others adapted by forming alliances or integrating aspects of European culture into their own. Native societies were forever changed by the encounter, with some groups disappearing entirely while others survived through resilience and adaptation.

## **II. Conclusion:**

The discovery of America transformed the world, connecting previously isolated continents and reshaping global history. While it led to economic and cultural growth for Europe, it also brought devastation to indigenous civilizations. The consequences of this encounter continue to influence modern societies, as historical narratives of discovery and **colonization** shape contemporary discussions on **identity**, **cultural heritage**, and **historical justice**. Understanding this event provides insight into the foundations of the modern world and the lasting effects of European exploration.

## **Sources:**

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