CHAPTER 18 - CONQUEST AND EXPLOITATION:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRANSATLANTIC ECONOMY

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discusses European contacts with the Americas from voyages of discovery in the 15th and early 16th centuries to the consolidation of mercantile empires in the 17th century and the development and administration of the Atlantic slave trade.

Since the Renaissance, European contacts with the rest of the world have gone through four distinct stages: 1) discovery, exploration, initial conquest and settlement of the New World (to 1700), 2) colonial trade rivalry among Spain, France and Britain (ca. 1700-1820), 3) European imperialism in Africa and Asia (19th century), and 4) decolonization of peoples previously under European rule (20th century).

The European powers administered their eighteenth century empires in accordance with the theory of mercantilism. The colonies were to provide markets and natural resources for the industries of the mother country. In turn, the latter was to furnish military security and the instruments of government. To protect its investment from competitors, each home country tried to keep a tight monopoly on trade with its colonies. The chapter then focuses on the organization and administration of the Spanish Empire, with special emphasis on the conquest of the Aztecs and the Incas.
The Spanish conquest of the West Indies, Mexico and the South American continent opened that vast region to the Roman Catholic faith. Religion, in fact, played a central role in the conquest of the New World. The mission of conversion justified military conquest and the extension of political control and dominance. As a result, the Roman Catholic Church in the New World was always a conservative force working to protect the political power and prestige of the Spanish authorities. Still, religious conversion represented an attempt to destroy a part of Native American culture, and some priests deplored the harsh conditions imposed on native peoples. The most outspoken clerical critic of the Spanish conquerors was Bartolomé de Las Casas (1477-1566), a Dominican who contended that conquest was not necessary for conversion. One result of his criticism was the emergence of the "Black Legend," which characterized Spanish treatment of Native Americans as unprincipled and inhumane.

Competition for foreign markets was intense among Britain, France and Spain. In North America, their colonists quarreled endlessly over the territory, fishing rights, fur trade and relationships with the Indians. Above all, they clashed over the West Indies, the lucrative producers of coffee, tobacco and especially sugar - and ready purchasers of African slaves. The chapter then focuses on the nature of slavery in the Americas, the plantation economy and the transatlantic slave trade that linked Europe, Africa, and the European colonies in South America, the Caribbean, and North America. Recent scholarship estimates that at a minimum Africa lost some thirteen million people to the Atlantic trade alone in addition to another five million exported to the oriental trade. The African slaves who were transported to the Americas were converted to Christianity. They became largely separated from African religious outlooks, though some African practices survived in muted forms. This conversion represented another example of the crushing of a set of non-European cultural values in the context of the New World economies and social structures.

European settlers in the Americas were generally prejudiced against black Africans, thinking them to be savage or less than civilized. Although racial thinking in regard to slavery became more important in the 19th century, the fact that slaves were differentiated from the rest of the population by race, as well as by their status as chattel property, was fundamental to the system.

The chapter then goes on to discuss the history and process of slaving in Africa, as well as the oriental and occidental slave trade. Between 1640 and 1690, the number of slaves sold to European traders doubled, increasing the growing participation of Africans in the expanding trade. These developments accelerated in the 18th century as the demands of expanding plantation economies fueled the trade. However, as European and American nations began to
outlaw slaving in the early 19th century, occidental demand slowed and prices sank. Although the oriental trade continued, indigenous African slavery began a real decline only at the end of the 19th century in part because of the dominance of European colonial regimes and in part because of internal changes.

**KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS**

1. **Mercantilism**: The early modern European empires of the 16th through 18th centuries existed primarily to enrich trade. To the extent that any formal theory lay behind the conduct of these empires, it was mercantilism. Economic writers of the time believed that a nation had to gain a favorable balance of gold and silver bullion. Colonies existed to provide markets and natural resources for the industries of the home countries. In turn, the home country furnished military security and political administration. The home country and its colonies were to trade exclusively with each other through a restrictive and complex system of tariffs and navigation laws. National monopoly was the ruling principle. Mercantilist ideas often did not mesh with the economic realities of the colonies. Colonial demands for relative economic independence often clashed with the welfare of the mother country and were met with even greater restrictions and punitive action. For all these reasons, the 18th century became the "golden age of smugglers."

2. **The African Slave Trade**: Slavery is one of the oldest of human institutions and virtually every premodern state in history depended on it to some extent. The African slave trade must be seen as part of the larger commercial system of Atlantic trade between Europe, Africa, and European colonies in North and South America and the Caribbean. The system was directed to exploitation of the New World and thus the slave trade grew not from racist principles (although they were used as justification), but from colonial economic needs. The major sources for slaves were the Kongo-Angola region and the Guinea coast. Well over twelve million persons were lost to Africa through the Atlantic trade. Taken as a whole, the slave trade varied in extent quite sharply from period to period with its peak in the eighteenth century and its demise in the nineteenth. The effects of the slave trade on Africa are not easy to assess. It appears that slavery was a result, not a cause of regional instability and change; increased warfare meant increased prisoners to be enslaved and sold off. Finally, the slave trade produced Africa's major
diaspora, which was also one of the major migrations of global history. From an American perspective, it was an important element in the formation of our modern society.

3. **Early Spanish Conquests:** The conquests of Mexico and Peru stand among the most dramatic and brutal stories in modern world history. One civilization armed with advanced weapons subdued, in a remarkably brief time, two powerful peoples. But beyond the bloodshed, these conquests marked a fundamental turning point of world civilizations. Never again in the Americas would native American peoples and their values have any significant impact or influence.

4. **The Transatlantic Economy in World Perspective:** The contact between the native peoples of the American continents and the European explorers of the 15th and 16th centuries transformed world history. America's native peoples encountered Europeans intent on conquest, exploitation and religious conversion. Because of their technological superiority in weaponry and the impact of disease, Europeans were able to achieve a rapid conquest. In both North and South America, economies of exploitation were established that relied on native labor to feed extensive plantation systems. Slaves were imported from Africa drawing Europeans, Africans, and Americans together in a vast world wide web of production based on slave labor. The Atlantic slave trade's impact on the history of the Americas and of the United States in particular continues to be felt in the development of laws and societal concerns such as racism.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*The Colonial Expansion of European Nations.* Coronet. 15 min.

*Colonial Expansion.* Encyclopaedia Britannica. 11 min.

*Colonial America in the 18th Century.* University Film Library Holder. 17 min.

*Colonialism: Ogre or Angel.* University Film Library Holder. 30 min.

*Francisco Pizarro.* Inca Nation, Peru, 1533. Time-Life Films. 30 min.