

1.3 Conquest, Disease and Trade

The pre-modern world shrank greatly in the sixteenth century after European sailors found a sea route to Asia and also successfully crossed the western ocean to America. For centuries before, the Indian Ocean had known a bustling trade, with goods, people, knowledge, customs, etc. criss-crossing its waters. The Indian subcontinent was central to these flows and a crucial point in their networks. The entry of the Europeans helped expand or redirect some of these flows towards Europe. Before its 'discovery', America had been cut off from regular contact with the rest of the world for millions of years. But from the sixteenth century, its vast lands and abundant crops and minerals began to transform trade and lives everywhere. Precious metals, particularly silver, from mines located in present-day Peru and Mexico also enhanced Europe's wealth and financed its trade with Asia. Legends spread in seventeenth-century Europe about South America's fabled wealth. Many expeditions set off in search of El Dorado, the fabled city of gold. The Portuguese and Spanish conquest and colonisation of America was decisively under way by the mid-sixteenth century. European conquest was not just a result of superior firepower. In fact, the most powerful weapon of the Spanish conquerors was not a conventional military weapon at all. It was the germs such as those of smallpox that they carried on their person. Because of their long isolation, America's original inhabitants had no immunity against these diseases that came from Europe. Smallpox in particular proved a deadly killer. Once introduced, it spread deep into the continent, ahead even of any Europeans reaching there. It killed and decimated whole communities, paving the way for conquest. London News, 1849. Hungry children digging for potatoes in a field that has already been harvested, hoping to discover some leftovers. During the Great Irish Potato Famine (1845 to 1849), around 1,000,000 people died of starvation in Ireland, and double the number emigrated in search of work. 'Biological' warfare? John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony in New England, wrote in May 1634 that smallpox signalled God's blessing for the colonists: '... the natives ... were neere (near) all dead of small Poxe (pox), so as the Lord hath (had) cleared our title to what we possess'. Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*. Box 1 India and the Contemporary World Explain what we mean when we say that the world 'shrank' in the 1500s. Discuss Guns could be bought or captured and turned against the invaders. But not diseases such as smallpox to which the conquerors were mostly immune. Until the nineteenth century, poverty and hunger were common in Europe. Cities were crowded and deadly diseases were widespread. Religious conflicts were common, and religious dissenters were persecuted. Thousands therefore fled Europe for America. Here, by the eighteenth century, plantations worked by slaves captured in Africa were growing cotton and sugar for European markets. Until well into the eighteenth century, China and India were among the world's richest countries. They were also pre-eminent in Asian trade. However, from the fifteenth century, China is said to have restricted overseas contacts and retreated into isolation. China's reduced role and the rising importance of the Americas gradually moved the centre of world trade westwards. Europe now emerged as the centre of world trade. New words Dissenter – One who refuses to accept established beliefs and practices A prospective buyer carefully inspecting slaves lined up before the auction. You can see two children along with four women and seven men in top hats and suit waiting to be

sold. To attract buyers, slaves were often dressed in their best clothes. The Making of a Global World The world changed profoundly in the nineteenth century. Economic, political, social, cultural and technological factors interacted in complex ways to transform societies and reshape external relations. Economists identify three types of movement or 'flows' within international economic exchanges. The first is the flow of trade which in the nineteenth century referred largely to trade in goods (e.g., cloth or wheat). The second is the flow of labour – the migration of people in search of employment. The third is the movement of capital for short-term or long-term investments over long distances. All three flows were closely interwoven and affected peoples' lives more deeply now than ever before. The interconnections could sometimes be broken – for example, labour migration was often more restricted than goods or capital flows. Yet it helps us understand the nineteenth-century world economy better if we look at the three flows together.