



Unit 5 Overview

All of the new ideas and advances of the Long Nineteenth Century had their limits or their dark sides. We see that especially in the rise of empires, many of which were ruled by new and seemingly democratic nation-states. These industrial powers competed for new colonies overseas, and created wide networks that exploited these colonies for profit. The result was a growing inequality in global income and experiences.



00:01

*Kim Lochner and Colby
Burnett in conversation*

You know how to tell the difference between imperialism and colonialism?

How?

Well, imperialism is like, “I should have all the stuff.” And colonialism is like, “What am I going to do with all this stuff? “I can’t keep track of my stuff. My stuff hates me and is rebelling against me.”

Okay, that’s, that’s nearly perfect, but there’s one other way to tell the difference.

Is it an eight-minute video?

(whispers): Yes.

00:30

*Artwork montage:
paintings depict
revolutions, and industrial
factories*

*Photo of a protest for labor
reform*

Hi, I’m Kim Lochner, and along with Colby Burnett, we’re introducing Unit 5: Imperialism, Colonialism, and Responses.

The transformation we’ve seen so far in the Long 19th Century were positive in many ways. Political revolutions helped develop ideas about individual rights, the sovereignty of the people, and citizenship. The Industrial Revolution allowed humans to produce many more consumer goods. Capitalism established an efficient free market. Reform movements and socialism introduced strategies to fight for the rights of workers and their families.

01:10

*Photo of three young boys
that work in factories;
artworks show oppressed
people around the world*

But we have also seen that all of these great ideas had their limits. Rights, privileges, and wealth came to some people, but not others. Large portions of the world’s population lived on the margins of these positive transformations. Whether it was because of gender, social class, occupation, ethnicity, or even just location, some people did not benefit from these new ideas and changes. One of the major factors that kept some people from the benefits of reformism, industrialization, or democracy was empire.

01:46

*Colby Burnett
Animated map shows
colonized areas of the
globe*

By definition, “empire” describes an unequal relationship between the people who rule and the people who are ruled. In the Long 19th Century, almost a third of the world’s landmass and population were part of industrial empires ruled by Britain, France, and newcomers like Germany, Japan, and the United States. And even though many of these states were at the forefront of democracy for their time, they ruled very unequal empires.

*Drawing of a port city
under imperial rule*

We can understand this inequality by looking at two particular concepts that were important in this era. The first concept is imperialism. Imperialism is the set of ideas and beliefs that a society holds that justifies taking over other people and ruling them. The second concept is colonialism. Colonialism describes the actual practices that empires carry out in their colonies which keep people in those colonies from getting the rights of citizens, and rules them through an often violent and oppressive system.

02:44

*Map shows the location of
the Ottoman and Mughal*

Of course, the empire was not a new type of state. In fact, as the era opened in 1750, there were already plenty of empires, some of them which were centuries-old. The Ottoman and Mughal empires ruled diverse populations across large parts of Asia and the Mediterranean.

empires

Revolutions:

American: 1775-1783

Haitian: 1791-1804

Latin American: 1810-1822

03:21

Kim Lochner

Animated map shows the territory conquered by Britain

European states had also built empires in the Americas beginning more than 200 years earlier. But at the start of this era, it looked like the size and number of empires was on the decline. The revolutions in the Americas—Haiti, the United States, and Latin America—dramatically decreased the overall reach of empires in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

But empires bounced back late in the 19th century, and in a big way. Britain’s gradual conquest of India, with its immense wealth and large population, began this trend, and, by the 1880s, Britain was competing with many other imperial states, all vying to acquire vast empires in South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Oceania. European, Japanese, and American governments all looked to create colonies in these regions for military advantage, national pride, and economic gain. They were able to take these territories largely because of the technological advantages they had acquired through the Industrial Revolution.

04:05

Animation: Empire as an interconnected network – workers in colonized territory load raw materials onto a train

The new industrial empires were more invasive, more extensive, and more exploitative than those that had come before. Each empire connected the imperial country to its colonies, and the colonies to each other, by industrial transportation and communication networks that made it possible to rule much larger areas than was previously imaginable. These networks tied together an exploitative system of production and distribution in which the colonies produced raw materials, which were sent to the imperial state for manufacturing into consumer goods. The colonies then bought back those consumer goods at a higher price. This meant that money flowed from the colonies to the imperial state, impoverishing some in order to enrich others. All of this was made possible by the inequality of the empire as a community, divided between imperial citizens and colonial subjects.

05:06

Colby Burnett

Graph shows people around the world making similar amounts of money per day in 1800; in 1975 the chart looks very different: most people living in poverty are in Asia and Africa; the wealthier people are, for the most part, in Europe and the Americas

We can see the results of this imperial inequality and exploitation in these two simple charts of global income-- the amount of money made by people in different regions. The first chart looks at the world in 1800, before the rise of the new imperialism. This chart shows that most people everywhere were quite poor, making the equivalent of less than a dollar a day in current prices, no matter where they lived. The majority of people lived in Asia, so we see a large number of Asians in that big hump of people living in quite poor circumstances. But most Africans, Europeans, and people in the Americas were similarly not wealthy. Only a small number of people were comparatively wealthy, and they came from different parts of the world. Now look at the same chart for 1975, when the large empires of the world finally collapsed. Here, we see two humps, rather than one. There is still a hump of people living in poverty. Most of them lived in Asia or Africa, two regions that were heavily colonized in the intervening years. By contrast, people in Europe and North America mainly fit in the second, wealthier hump to the right.

Was it empire and colonialism that created this “double-hump” of poor in one region and wealthy in another? If so, how? How were modern empires created, administered, and contested in the Long 19th Century, and how did these tensions help to create the world we live in today?

06:28

Kim Lochner

If we want answers, we have to look into the histories of the colonies themselves. For people living in the colonies, empire destroyed old, local systems and replaced them with new, foreign ones. These new systems disregarded the needs of local people in favor of the desires of the colonizers. The result was dramatic change.

Photographs of European architecture in Hanoi

Take the city of Hanoi, the capital of the independent state of Vietnam at the beginning of this era. In 1883, the French annexed Vietnam, so Hanoi became a French-ruled city. In an effort to modernize the city and make it easier to rule, the French destroyed many old neighborhoods and replaced them with straight roads and orderly districts. Because imperialism relies on hierarchy, the French segregated the city, with white districts in the center and indigenous Vietnamese neighborhoods in the less desirable areas. From there, the Vietnamese commuted into the white districts for low-paying jobs. They had almost no say in the process.

07:37

A photo of one of the traditional structures left in place in Hanoi

Not everything was destroyed—some large buildings were preserved, but only as tourist sites reflecting “history” and “local culture.” The city had been fundamentally transformed. Outside of town, the French seized small farms and turned them into vast rubber plantations to feed French industry, instead of the Vietnamese people.

A drawing depicts Vietnamese farmers protesting

But of course, the Vietnamese fought back. Sometimes, their resistance was almost invisible. It took the form of work slowdowns, or hiding from French labor gangs, or just not following the law. Sometimes, it was loud and dramatic. In 1908, for example, Vietnamese farmers surrounded the office of the governor and protested against French rule. They marched, made speeches, and even threatened the colonial state. Their protest was eventually put down violently. Nevertheless, it was part of a long history of resistance that would ultimately bring down French rule.

08:37

*Colby Burnett
Animated map shows resistance around the world*

Elsewhere, colonial subjects responded to empire by finding ways to resist. Market women boycotted British goods in Nigeria. Cuban peasants armed themselves and conducted a guerrilla war against Spanish rule. In India, resistance ran the gamut from work slowdowns all the way up to a widespread, armed rebellion against British rule in 1857. So the history of empire in this era is a history of both imperial rule and of resistance. Both, in the end, contributed to the making of our modern world.

Colby Burnett and Kim Lochner in conversation

I hereby claim this classroom as my own, and it shall be called Colbytown.

Okay, this is their classroom.

Yes, but I’m colonizing it as a part of a demonstration.

So, you’re going to be in charge of cleaning it and paying the electricity bill...

Imperialism fails again.

Yup.