



WHP-1200 Communities Frame Intro | World History Project

All humans live in communities. Communities help define who we are. They provide us with support, protection, and a sense of shared identity. Examples of communities include families, neighborhoods, states, religions, and even online forums. Human communities have generally grown, and frequently changed, over time. Many new forms of communities have emerged in the last 800 years. By exploring the history of communities, this video reveals the role community plays in the present, and the possibilities for building and strengthening the communities of the future.

0:14

Image series of groups of people.

Nobody really lives “alone”. We exist together, whether it’s in the same neighborhood or meeting online. We interact in community—communities, really—with other people—people with whom we share experience and identity. Our communities help define who we are, giving us a sense of “us”. Living in a community is a universal, shared characteristic of humans. But although the need for community might be a constant, how humans met that need has changed over the long sweep of our history.

Sometimes those changes are small. But a few times in the past hundreds of thousands of years, we have drastically altered or remade the types, nature, and size of the communities in which we lived. Humans have shaped those changes and those changes have in turn shaped us and who we are.

1:11

Graphic of communities frame.

Text of different community types.

The communities frame captures some of the biggest changes in our communities and it will help you navigate your journey through world history.

In telling this story, we will focus on a few important types of human communities—cities, and states, and religions. But remember, we will be leaving “stuff” out, details that support, extend, or challenge this story. You’ll be able to fill in details as you go through the course, learning “stuff” that you can use to test the frame’s claims, to make it more accurate and complete, or make it more meaningful to you!

Illustrations and text on Unit 2.

Our narrative of the communities frame begins in Unit 2, in the year 1200. This was a world of diverse communities. Vast distances and physical barriers separated humanity into different regions, fostering huge variation in the ways people organized themselves.

2:07

Series of illustrations of different communities.

People lived in kingdoms, chiefdoms, tribes, empires, city-states, kin-based groups, and many other types of communities. And they practiced many different forms of religion. Though there were exceptions, however, most people did not interact with people from distant communities. Life in 1200, you see, was local for almost everyone.

Text and illustrations on Unit 3.

Then, in Unit 3, the first sustained transoceanic connections linked up the Americas, Afro-Eurasia, and the Pacific, forever transforming communities all over the globe. New linkages brought new ideas and people to new communities as Europeans conquered vast overseas empires. But in this same era, several powerful Eurasian land-based empires conquered the remnants of the collapsed Mongol Empire. Both oceanic and land-based empires ruled territories with many different communities of people who had different languages, customs, and religions. Empires have been around for thousands of years, but new characteristics began emerging in this era.

3:16

Illustrations of communities.

Still, even in large empires, people continued to participate in and identify with smaller, more local communities—families, villages, and cities. But people also created new communities that moved beyond local areas and these communities blended different ideas and cultures. These communities often stretched between cities and empires, uniting people with shared beliefs, interests, or occupations.

Text and illustrations on Unit 4.

Unit 4 begins in the eighteenth century, when a series of revolutions launched a new kind of community—the nation-state.

Text and illustrations of nation-states.

In this type of community, political authority rested with a nation, a population of people living in a common region who shared what they believed was a common identity. And nation-states grew, although they grew, slowly.

Text and footage on Unit 7, 8, and 9.

Empires remained the dominant community through Unit 7 even as powerful nation-states engaged in two global conflicts. But empires began to crumble in our last two units of our course as people fought to free themselves from empire and establish their own independent nation-states.

4:27

Footage of word flags.

Today, people participate in communities of many different types and sizes. But the nation-state has become the most powerful sort of community that shapes our identities. These days we could even say, we live in a world of nation-states.

Illustrations of colonization and enslavement.

Now in telling this story, we might have made the transition between types of communities seem smooth. But it wasn't. There were tensions between and among people living in different types of communities. For example, as transoceanic connections were established in Unit 3, they came with extreme violence, as Europeans conquered indigenous communities in the Americas and enslaved over 12 million Africans, decimating West African populations for generations. And over the last 200 years or so, the desire for independent nation-states exerted powerful, disruptive forces on empires, some of which had survived for hundreds of years.

5:19

Text and images of new types of communities.

And importantly, this is likely not the final state of human communities. Innovations like the internet and jet airlines offer ways for us to create communities of people who do not live together, and who may never even meet in person. New international communities and even virtual communities are emerging alongside traditional community groups like families, cities, the nation-state, and religion.

Images of religion, neighborhood, and nation.

Yet this increasing globalization has not made the local community less relevant, but rather more. In the confusion of the wider world, our identities —religions, neighborhoods, ethnicities, and nations— often seem like safe, comforting places to retreat to and find support.

Communities frame graphic.

The “tool” that we have created to understand these processes —what we call the Communities Frame— should help you remember and use this big story. You might use this tool to locate the details of the events you'll study in a larger story. You will see, for example, that we have threaded this story of communities through the units that we used to structure this course.

6:23

Text of questions and communities.

We hope that thinking about different ways to view the history of human communities, moving back and forth between our larger communities and our local ones, will help you see more clearly the role community plays in the present. What's gonna happen next? What kinds of communities does the future hold? And how can we learn from the communities of the past? These are questions that make it valuable for us to study the long history of human communities.

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