



WHP 1200 Production and Distribution Frames Introduction | World History Project

We already know that humans live in communities and share things and ideas across networks. The production and distribution frame helps us understand human history by examining how we make things and share, sell, or trade them within our communities and across networks of interaction. Humans have become increasingly sophisticated in the ways we produce goods and tools, and how we distribute them. As our world has globalized, this increasing sophistication has caused many problems that we deal with today. Exploring these changes and the challenges they have created can orient us to the present and help prepare us for the future.

0:14

*Image examples
of production and
distribution.*

*Illustrated examples
of production and
distribution.*

*Production and
Distribution frame graphic.*

Course timeline graphic.

More than any other species, humans make and use “things”. And we call the process of making these things production.

We also share, and sell, and trade the things we make. And we call this process distribution.

Now both production and distribution have become increasingly complex over time. And the ways that humans and their communities have produced, and distributed goods and services have changed over history.

Developing a big picture of major changes in the ways we produce and distribute goods and services should help you as you begin your study of the human past. It'll give you a frame, or perspective, to help you fit the pieces of human history together.

Then when you encounter significant events or processes in the different units of the course, this story should help you locate them in the larger flow of human history.

1:08

Graphic biographies.

*Illustrations of producers
and merchants.*

*World map with
international trade routes
highlighted.*

We're also look closely at specific events or people to see how well they fit into our big picture. Sometimes individual pieces won't quite fit. In those cases, we'll have to modify the picture to create a better understanding of the ways our systems of production and distribution have changed over time.

So, what is a big picture that shows how our systems have changed?

Well, we begin the story of production and distribution in this course in Unit 2, eight hundred years ago. In 1200 CE, most people were farmers, herders, or other food producers. Some were artisans, who had the specialized skills needed to make goods to sell at market. Others were merchants, who bought and sold goods and food. A few were the elites who owned the land on which others worked.

From 1200 to 1450 CE, new regional systems of distribution evolved to make and to trade goods created in one place, to other places. These systems were often along routes that covered great distances, requiring many steps and lots of participants.

2:13

*Text definitions of the
Columbian Exchange.*

*Illustrations of the
transatlantic slave trade.*

By the end of Unit 2, two great regional systems of distribution had emerged: one in the Americas and the other connecting much of Africa, Europe, and Asia. Then, at the start of Unit 3, we will see how these two systems were connected in the Columbian Exchange, launching the first global age.

This exchange sent new species of plants and animals to new parts of the world, forever reshaping patterns of food production.

Another aspect of the exchange was the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade, in which Europeans enslaved 12 million Africans and forced them to work in European colonies in the Americas. This system of plantations and enslavement allowed Europeans to use the natural resources of the Americas to produce new trade goods and power their empires.

*Illustrations of producers
and energy sources.*

Despite these changes in production and the growth in distribution networks, the ways people created goods up until 1750 were pretty similar to the methods people had been using for thousands of years. People learned to make things better, but only bit-by-bit and without many major changes. They still depended on biology and the environment to provide the energy needed to produce and distribute goods and services.

3:26

But then about 250 years ago, that suddenly changed. In Unit 5, you'll explore how human use of fossil fuels created an energy bonanza that helped launch The Industrial Revolution. This fundamentally transformed the amount of work that could be done, who did it, and where it was done.

*Illustrations and images
of early and post-
industrial production and
distribution.*

Work shifted from farms in the country to factories in cities and from goods produced directly by human or animal labor to goods produced by machines. Fossil fuels also helped transform our methods of distribution by creating vast global markets for goods.

Illustrated world map.

Political communities called empires helped drive this new global, industrial system. Industrialization provided empires with the means and the motivations to expand their empires to new places.

*Images of production in
the colonies.*

Colonizers took raw materials from their colonies and shipped them home to be turned into consumer goods in factories before shipping those goods back to the colonies to be sold for profit.

4:25

*Images of modern
production.*

Over the last hundred years or so (a period you're gonna investigate in Unit 9) the changes prompted by industrialization have transformed the type of work people do. They have also revolutionized our ability to produce large amounts of goods, including the food we eat.

*Graphs showing
population increases in the
last two hundred years.*

As a result, we have more things than our ancestors did—many more! In the last century, industrialization has allowed the global population to skyrocket from fewer than 2 billion people in 1900 to almost 8 billion today. Producing food and goods for a growing world is one of the great challenges our species faces in the coming century.

Now the big story I just told covered eight centuries and will continue into the future. And I told it in just a few minutes. This story framed major changes in the way we produced and distributed all the goods and services we use.

*Production and
Distribution frame graphic.*

But how might you use this big picture?

5:22

Can it help you to locate individual events in time? Does it offer you a way to think about trends across time? Or to assess the strengths and weaknesses of our current system of production and our global system of distribution?

Are we better or worse off than our ancestors who produced their own food and goods 800 years ago? Can we say we've made progress? And what was the cost of all this innovation in production and distribution?

These questions and others about production and distribution can help us make sense of the global past.

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