



WHP 1200 Unit 6 Frames | World History Project

The rise of industrialized empires in the long nineteenth century seems to contradict the stories we have told so far through all three frames. Wasn't political liberalism supposed to end empire and bring political equality? Wasn't the Industrial Revolution supposed to promote free labor? Weren't reformers fighting to end inequality? Unit 6 asks students to use all three frames to better understand the changes of the long nineteenth century and how they produced uneven results for different people. In turn, this will help students think about how these inequalities persist in the present.

0:12

Painting depicting the US army.

Paintings depicting various revolutions.

Map of empires in South Asia.

World map of industrialized empires with text "Industrial Empires in 1900".

1:13

Community, Production and Distribution, and Networks frame graphics.

Community frame graphic.

Illustrations of legislative body

2:06

Political cartoon.

Production and Distribution frame graphic.

Illustrations of industrialized cities.

Images of people working in fields.

The late eighteenth century is often called an Age of Revolutions. And we have seen how many of those biggest revolutions were political: to some people living at the time, it looked like empires were retreating while nation-states were rising.

And the independence of many of the American colonies—like Haiti and the United States and much of Latin America—certainly must have seemed like the beginning of a trend.

But empire didn't really retreat; it just relocated. One site of empire-building in this period was the vast region of South Asia, where the British Empire built one of the largest colonies of all time even as it surrendered many of its American territories.

And South Asia was just the beginning. By the mid-nineteenth century, industrialization had launched a new age of empires. From Europe and Japan and North America, these new industrialized empires expanded rapidly, carving up much of East and Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and Africa.

So, how do we discuss empires in the context of our three frames for this course? And, especially, how do we discuss them in light of all the other changes of the long nineteenth century?

Well, in many ways, empires seem to contradict the major trends we have discussed in the last two units. And we can see this better by looking through our three frames.

So, for example, in Unit 4, we saw how the long nineteenth century gave rise to new ideas about community. And we know that liberal and national revolutions created nation-states in which citizens held individual sovereignty and could participate politically.

But at the same time, empires created groups of people who were subjects with few or none of the rights of citizens.

And ironically, many of the new empires came from the most advanced, democratic nation-states of the era—places like Britain and France and the United States. So while claiming to be the torchbearers of democracy, these states excluded the people of their colonies from participating politically in their own governance.

And you may also recall how Unit 5 focused on industrialization during the long nineteenth century.

In that unit, we saw how the growth of industrial factories radically transformed production and distribution.

And that kind of industrialization was happening most rapidly at the centers of many of the new empires.

But, these imperial powers did not allow most of their colonies to industrialize. Within those territories, farmers with hand tools remained the main producers of food, for example.

2:59

Map of India with image of railroad.

And in fact, the imperial powers only encouraged industrialization in the colonies when it allowed them to extract some valuable local resources. In India, for example the British laid hundreds of miles of railroad but only so they could move raw materials—like cotton—more efficiently to British factories. The imperial homeland, not the colony, was the one benefitting from this exchange.

Networks frame graphic.

Finally, at the end of Unit 5 we focused on reform movements in the long nineteenth century.

Images of activists protesting.

And we saw how efforts to reform expanded rapidly in many places, creating widespread networks of activists. And these activists worked to end slavery and to ensure rights for women, workers, and children.

Political cartoons of empire.

In the same way, these reformers, many of them imperial citizens, spoke of “civilizing” their colonial subjects.

But the reality was that few empires extended rights to subjects in their colonies. Instead, people living in the colonies lived under strict law that justified poor treatment on the basis of “race”, a category that was becoming increasingly important in this era to define how people experienced life.

4:13

Community, Production and Distribution, and Networks frame graphics.

So by looking at empires and colonialism through the three frames, we can better understand how people everywhere saw the world.

We can explore how the changes in people’s sense of community in the long nineteenth century, like the rise of nationalism, could help people to liberate themselves, but also lead them to think it was okay to oppress people in their colonies.

We can investigate the way in which industrial production and distribution produced more food and consumer goods than ever before but only by exploiting people and resources in colonies.

And we can ask why networks of reformers, spreading around empires, actually failed to really improve the lives or recognize the needs of people living in their colonies.

Recognizing these limitations helps us to better understand the changes of the long nineteenth century and how they produced uneven results for different people, and perhaps it can also help us to think about how these inequalities persist in the present.