



Unit 5: Industrialization 1750 to 1914

By Trevor Getz

Industrialization changed the way people lived. But not everyone benefited, and not everyone felt these changes in the same way.

740L

Just another manic Monday

Picture this: A woman wakes up. She makes breakfast, using eggs and bread she bought at the grocery store. Then she heads to the train station. She takes a train to a factory where she works all day, making things for other people to buy. When work is over, she takes the train home.

Sounds like a pretty ordinary day, right? This routine was familiar to many in the mid-1800s as well. This was the era of the Industrial Revolution, when industrialization took place. Industrialization is the process of developing, or building, widespread industries and businesses.



Packaged food and medicine. Brought to you by the Industrial Revolution. You're welcome? © Getty.

But there was a time before this became the way of life. Before 1750, there weren't really any grocery stores. People didn't buy food in boxes or cans. Hardly anyone worked in a factory or an office. All of these changes were part of the Industrial Revolution.

In this unit, we will explore how the Industrial Revolution changed our way of life. We will look at how it affected different groups of people, and those living in different parts of the world. For example, did women and men have the same experience? What was industrialization like in rural areas? What about in cities? And what was it like for people who had more or less money?

To answer these questions, we'll look at how goods were made, bought, and sold. We will also look at how industrialization changed the world, globally and locally.

Origins of the Industrial Revolution

We usually think about the Industrial Revolution as beginning in Europe. However, to really understand where, how, and why the Industrial Revolution started, we must think on both the global and local scale.

Locally, we need to start in Britain. London, the capital of Britain, hosted the Olympics in 2012. The opening ceremonies featured dark smokestacks looming over a peaceful hillside. This is because industrialization began in Britain in the 1700s. Why did it start there? There are a few reasons. Most of the British people lived on one pretty flat island. This made it fairly easy to travel from place to place. The land was rich in resources that were good for industry. The most important of these was coal. It could be burned to create energy.



Filmmaker Danny Boyle directed the opening ceremonies of the 2012 Olympics in Great Britain, which told the story of the nation's history with special emphasis on the Industrial Revolution. © Getty.

Britain had a lot of people who needed jobs. This meant there were many willing factory workers. And British scientists were some of the first to focus on the technology needed to industrialize. James Watt was a Scottish engineer. He developed the first useful steam engine. His engine was then used to power other important inventions, like the spinning mule and the power loom. They were two key machines used to spin cotton and weave it into cloth.

The earliest railroads were also built in Britain. As more factories were built, British cities grew rapidly. Some people moved from the countryside to cities to look for work. Many moved because they had no other choice. Under British law, the government could take land away from those who worked on it. This turned many British farmers into factory workers, whether they liked it or not.

Britain's Industrial Revolution was also influenced by global issues. For example, many early British inventions were inspired by inventions from other countries. Chinese scientists had built small steam engines before James Watt made his version. Workplaces that resembled factories had existed elsewhere before popping up in Britain. They could be found on British Caribbean sugar plantations, for example, and in flour mills in the northeast United States. British scientists learned about these experiments in other regions. They used them in their own work.

The world industrializes, but to mixed reviews

Britain's vast empire also fueled its industrialization. During this time, Britain had colonies all around the world, in Africa, India, North America, and the Caribbean. Laws, beliefs, and financial systems connected people in all parts of the empire. These connections helped increase trade between Britain and its colonies. This means factory workers could eat food grown elsewhere in the empire, for example. They didn't have to grow their own. British factories also took raw materials from their colonies. Wool from Australia and New Zealand supported Britain's textile production. Cotton to make cloth came from India.

Soon the Industrial Revolution went global. The United States, Europe, and Japan all industrialized in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Progress in colonized places like Egypt and India was held back, however. European leaders purposely prevented full industrialization there. This protected British producers from too much competition.

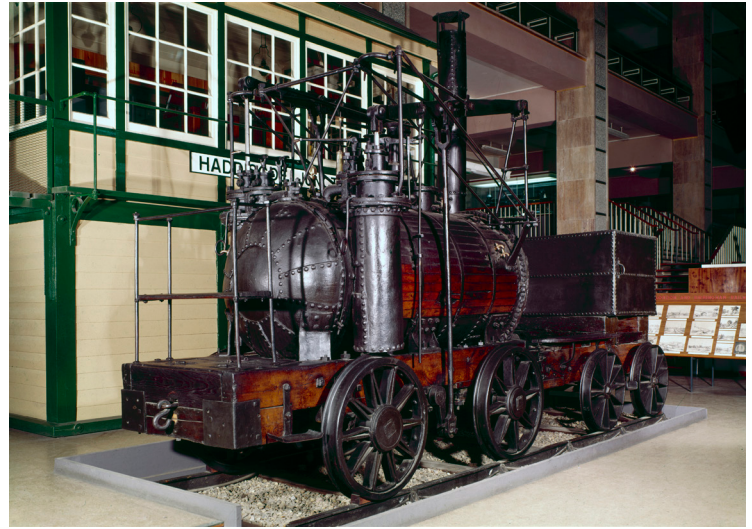
Economic transformations

The biggest factor contributing to the spread of industrialism was money. This era saw the growth of capitalism as an economic system. Under capitalism, land, businesses, and wealth are mostly owned by people, not by the government. This system tended to put more wealth in the hands of business owners.

Capitalism helped increase overall productivity in the world. At the same time, it made working conditions harder for many people. Workers—including children—labored on farms and plantations or in factories. Their work increased profits for factory owners. It did not have the same positive impacts for the workers themselves. So many pushed for improvements to their working conditions. They called for an end to child labor, bad working conditions, and slavery. They also called for women's rights.

Some workers wanted a different economic system, called socialism. Under socialism, the government would own businesses and factories. The workers believed socialism would place more power in the hands of workers. It could help to distribute wealth more equally.

The development of socialism caused lots of disagreement about what the best financial system looks like. These debates continue even today!



"Puffing Billy," the world's oldest surviving steam-powered locomotive. As author of this article, I have to admit to being a bit of a nerdy train person, so I made sure you got a picture of a train.
© Getty.

Social transformations

The impacts of industrialization were not the same for all communities. Even within Britain, factory work allowed some people to earn more money and make their own choices in life. For others, it brought suffering and poverty. It was often more liberating for men than for women. Many women found themselves confined either to the home or to underpaid jobs in a factory.

Industrialization changed even the smallest type of community—the family. It changed the way we think about men and women’s roles in society. It even changed the way we think about what it means to be a kid.



The Industrial Revolution helped to transform the family around the world, for example putting an emphasis on the nuclear family—a mother, father, and children—rather than the extended family as an economic unit. © Getty.

What created these differences? How long did they last? And what have they become today? These are all important questions to ask as we study the Industrial Revolution.

Trevor Getz

Trevor Getz is Professor of African and world History at San Francisco State University. He has written or edited eleven books, including the award-winning graphic history *Abina and the Important Men*, and co-produced several prize-winning documentaries. He is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

Image credits

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The Industrial Revolution helped to transform the family around the world, for example putting an emphasis on the nuclear family— a mother, father, and children—rather than the extended family as an economic unit. © Photo 12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.



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