



Era 6 Overview

The “long nineteenth century” is a term that describes the period between about 1750 and 1914 (so, much more than a century!). This period saw rapid changes in the way people lived, worked, travelled, produced things, governed themselves, and connected to each other. Some of these changes were conflicting: for example, the rise of empires and nation-states at the same time, or the rise of ideas about liberty and rights alongside with the development of huge inequalities. Together, though, these transformations practically invented the ‘modern world’.



00:01

*Kim Lochner and Colby
Burnett*

Colby, have you ever wondered why we both speak English even though we're from completely different hemispheres?

And nowhere near England?

It's weird, right?

It is weird. It's also imperialism. Um, Kim? Can I borrow your shoe? What for?

I'll tell you later.

00:23

Kim Lochner

*Various artworks depict
people farming, working
with animals, building
fires, and in small villages*

*Travelers on camel
and horseback; weary
travelers walking; a man
writes something down
with a quill and ink*

Hi, I'm Kim Lochner and along with Colby Burnett, we're introducing Era 6, the long 19th century. In our story, or stories, of human history so far, the world of 1750 CE seems a long way from the first eras that came before. But life for people in 1750 wasn't really all that different from the lives of their great-grandparents, or great-great-grandparents, or even more distant ancestors. Most of the things that we think of as modern didn't yet exist. Most people were still farmers, fishers, or herders. Few had paying jobs as we would think of them today. People interacted with only members of their own town or village or some neighboring communities for almost their entire lives. Those who wanted to travel had to embark on camels, or horses, or sailing ships. More often, they traveled by foot. The telegraph hadn't been invented yet. Mail service was limited to a privileged few. The idea of a democratic government—or even of a nation of citizens—did not yet exist.

01:38

*Timeline shows
technological advances: in
1844, the first telegraph
message, in 1869, the US
transcontinental railroad
was completed, in 1903,
the first airplane!*

*Video footage: people
working on farms and in
factories, and purchasing
food in the market*

By 1914, however, many features of the modern, connected world had come to exist. The telephone and telegraph had been invented. People could communicate rapidly across vast distances for the first time. There were early types of airplanes, and plenty of trains and even—in some places—cars to move people and goods.

Many people were still farmers, but others worked in factories or in business offices like they do today. They earned a wage for their work, and they used that money to buy their food from grocery stores and market sellers. And while there were many kings and shahs and emperors, people increasingly believed themselves to be citizens of a nation, and that that nation should have a state, and that that state should be independent and ruled at least somewhat democratically.

02:31

For these reasons, many historians view the long 19th century—a period from about 1750 to 1914—as a time of revolutionary change. But what really changed between 1750 and 1914? How did the world we live in come into being? What engines of change created our modern world?

02:56

*Colby Burnett
Map zooms in on Senegal;
a painting of Senegal as a
French colony.*

To answer these questions, we must look at long 19th century revolutionary change from the varied perspectives of people who lived in big cities, small towns, and farms around the world. Let's start with the French colony of Senegal, in West Africa. Often ignored by world histories, this African colony participated in, and was affected by, some of the momentous events and trends of the day. It was a colony that formed around one major trade—in enslaved people.

Paintings depict uprisings and fighting in Senegal

04:05

Artworks show revolutions – fighting, and raising of flags

Animated map shows the British Empire expanding its territories over time

04:47

Painting of a schoolteacher teaching his class

Video footage of national meetings and celebrations, including a parade

05:23

Kim Lochner

Video footage shows a man attempting to fix his wagon (a wheel has come off) while a train whizzes by

Video footage of factories belching out polluting smoke, and of people crowding in cities, operating farm equipment, and working in factories

Photo of two young children in a factory

After abolition, the main trade was gum arabic, used in the industrial cloth industry. As the locals involved in this trade scrambled for profit, they participated in revolutions in France. They found opportunity in the 1789 and 1848 uprisings against French aristocrats as an opportunity to take on French companies that dominated the gum trade. They also fought for political representation, eventually winning the right to elect one member of the French Parliament. But they also increasingly came under the authoritarian rule of French imperialism. So while the Senegalese are not found in the stories of revolutionary change, they were in fact participating in the making of the modern world.

The origins of modernity, or the coming of the modern world, was a series of revolutions that occurred between 1750 and 1914. These transformations arguably began with a shifting sense of what a community is, who is a member, and how it should be run.

Communities, in this era, were changing in two contradictory ways. The first was the rise of vast empires made up of lots of smaller states. The inhabitants of one state became a ruling class, and all the others became subjects of the empire. Subjects had fewer rights and less voice in how they were governed. These empires promoted inequalities that still exist today. They led to modern categories like “race” and “ethnicity.”

But the other, and in many ways even more significant, transformation in how people began to organize themselves was the idea of a nation that emerged at this time. Nations are different than empires because they are made up of a great majority of people that are aware of having a common identity as members of that nation. As members of the nation, they begin to think that they should have certain rights to help govern the nation, to be citizens rather than subjects. Because of this, two ideas about community—a slightly evolved view of empire and a new view of nation—grew and competed during the long 19th century.

Changes in how communities organize themselves may not have been the most dramatic revolution of the era. Changes in technology also began to transform how people lived in most places around the world.

The Industrial Revolution may have been the single most dramatic transformation in production and distribution in the history of the world, certainly since humans learned how to farm. Using fossil fuels as energy, people put machines to work in factories and on farms producing vast amounts of food and finished products. Many people, displaced by machines, moved from farms to cities to work in new factories making goods to sell to others. With new industrial machines and the use of fossil fuels, farms and factories could produce far more goods and products. More and more, adults, and sometimes children, went to work for businesses that paid them wages—wages they could use to buy and then consume the goods and products from factories and industrial farms.

06:30

Footage of cars and a steamship

Workers and business owners alike became participants in the capitalist economic system that dominates the world today. Industrial technology also allowed people and things to move around more rapidly. New inventions such as the train and the steamship, and later the car and the airplane, let people travel as tourists, ship goods long distances, and even migrate to new nation-states. Other technologies allowed them to communicate rapidly as well, via phone and telegraph. These technologies together, in this era, helped to create the modern, global network that characterizes our era.

07:09

Colby Burnett

Photo of a cobbler making a shoe by hand is contrasted with video footage of shoes being made in factories

The developments of the long 19th century also encouraged communities across the world to adopt some common practices or ways of doing things. We call bringing a common and established size, weight, quality, or criteria to something “standardization.” Standardization increased as both industrialization and empires expanded. Consider the example of shoe size. Once upon a time, a cobbler would measure your foot to make a shoe that fit that foot. With industrialization, shoes sizes became standard. The foot now had to fit a common shoe size. The demand to create common standards put pressure on people’s common or local ways of doing things.

Photo montage of constitutions and declarations, advertisements, and letters

We continue to see standardization today. In fact, I’ll bet you took a standardized test this year. We find evidence for the transformations of the long 19th century in the documentary history of the age. In constitutions and declarations, in patent letters for new inventions, and in advertisements for an increasing range of consumer goods, and in the standardization of things that impact daily life.

08:14

A table shows the dramatic increase in CO2 emissions from 1750 until now

We also find evidence in quantitative data. Industrialization and standardization, for example, is extremely measurable. For instance, if we look at the CO2 emissions from 1750 to today, we can see that they have gone from 280 to over 400 parts per million. That’s the highest level in the last two million years. While CO2 can actually be cycled out of the atmosphere relatively quickly, as it absorbs into vegetation and the soil, the impact of human activities can last for hundreds of years. This chart gives us one picture of how the Industrial Revolution changed the environment in which we live, as viewed through the amount of CO2 in our atmosphere.

08:54

Kim Lochner

Photos of modern-day technologies such as a cell phone are contrasted with drawings of early factories.

Your daily life is affected by many of these changes. Your cell phone, the lights in your house, and pretty much everything you own were only made possible by the Industrial Revolution. Most of them, along with your daily food, were probably bought with wages earned in a capitalist economic system. You are probably a citizen of a nation-state with a government that both guarantees and limits your personal rights and freedoms. These are all products of the long 19th century, an era of great change, an era in which the modern world was forged.

09:34

Thinking about all the changes that occurred during this time period, ask yourself—were these changes shared equally across the world? Who did these changes happen to? And when? How were they experienced differently by different people? Did everyone benefit from these equally? Did some bear the burden of change more than others?

Historians use evidence to answer these questions. Their answers are not all the same. We hope you'll weigh some of these questions and answers and perhaps create your own to help you think about the world in which we live.

*Colby Burnett and Kim
Lochner in conversation*

Wow, that's...

It's a lot.

I mean, like, what if they decide industrialization was the wrong way to go? It's not like they can turn it off.

Colby, remember, we talked about this. End on a high note.

Uh, what about if I just give you your shoe back?

Well, that works, yeah.