



Frames in Unit 5

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? So, was empire an exception to the general way of things in this era, or an example of the limits and contradictions of all these revolutions?



00:01

*Bob Bain, PhD, University
of Michigan*

*Artworks depict revolution
against colonists*

In the late 18th century, empires seemed to be retreating while nation-states were rising. The independence of many of the American colonies—Haiti, the United States, and much of Latin America—looked like the beginning of a trend.

But empire never really fled the scene. This was especially true in south Asia, where the British quietly built one of the largest colonies of all time. Then, less than a hundred years later, empires began rapidly expanding again. They carved up much of east and southeast Asia, the Pacific, and Africa.

00:43

*Drawing of a political
meeting contrasted with
a drawing depicting stern
guards looking over poor
subjects*

*Comic depicts a man
standing over the United
States and stepping over
to conquer Mexico*

How do we discuss empires in the context of our three frames for this course? And how do we discuss them in light of the three units we have just studied? In many ways, empires—viewed through the frames of community, production and distribution, and networks—contradict all of the trends we have discussed so far.

For example, in Unit 2, we saw how the long 19th century gave rise to a new type of community called nation-states. In a nation-state, citizens had individual sovereignty and could participate politically. But empires created groups of people who were subjects with few or none of the rights of citizens. Ironically, many of the most advanced democratic nation-states of the era—including Britain, France, and the United States—created empires of their own. In spite of their claims to being the torchbearers of democracy, they excluded their West African, Vietnamese, or Filipino subjects—and the people of hundreds of other communities—from political participation in their own governance.

01:46

*Painting of factory
workers sweating and
working in overcrowded
conditions*

*Black and white photo of a
huge mine*

You may also recall how Unit 3 focused on industrialization during the long 19th century. In that unit, we saw how the growth of industrial processes and factories radically transformed production and distribution. But while industrialization happened rapidly in many imperial states, these empires did not allow most of their colonies to industrialize. Farmers equipped with obsolete tools remained the main producers of food in the colonies.

Indeed, the imperial powers only encouraged industrialization. In their colonies, industries like mining and timber allowed the empires to extract valuable local resources. Then the imperial homeland, not the colony, benefitted from these raw materials.

02:34

*Black and white photo
montage of activists; a
disturbing photo of a
colonist with a young child
subject*

Finally, in Unit 4 we focused on reform movements in the long 19th century. We saw how efforts to reform expanded rapidly in many places and created widespread networks of activists. These activists worked to ensure rights for women, workers, and children. Imperial citizens, many of whom were reformers, spoke of “civilizing” their colonial subjects. But the reality was that few empires extended rights to subjects in the colonies. Instead, colonial subjects lived under strict regimes that justified their poor treatment on the basis of race, a category that was becoming increasingly important in defining how people experienced life in this era.

03:19

By looking at empires and colonialism through the three frames, we can better understand how people in the colonies experienced the world. We can explore how changes in people’s sense of community in the long 19th century, like the rise of nationalism, could both help people to liberate themselves,

and lead them to think it's okay to oppress the people in their colonies. We can investigate the way in which industrial production and distribution managed to produce more food and different things than ever before, and still keep some people in poverty. We can ask why networks of reformers spread in imperial states, but often failed to really improve the lives or recognize the needs of people in the colonies.

Discovering these limitations help us to better understand how change happened in the long 19th century differently for different people, and perhaps to think about how ideas, economic systems, and communities are shaped today.