



Production and Distribution

Production and Distribution Frame Introduction

We already know that humans live in communities and share things and ideas across networks. There is another important frame to help you understand human history. In this frame, we look at how we make things and share, sell, or trade them within our communities and across networks. The earth and our universe provided the raw materials. But across history, humans have become increasingly sophisticated in how we produce and distribute goods and tools. But this increasing sophistication has caused some problems that we deal with today. Exploring these changes and problems can orient us to the present and help prepare us for the future.



00:01

*“Be the first to the field
and the last to the couch”
- Chinese saying
Bob Bain, PhD, University
of Michigan*

More than any other species, humans make and use things. We call this process of making things production. We also share or sell or trade the things we make. We call this process distribution. 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.

00:38

Developing a brief but 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. We'll give you a frame, or perspective, to help you fit the pieces of human history together. When you encounter different events or processes in the different eras of the course, this story should help you locate the event or processes in the larger flow of human history.

We will also look closely at specific events or people or processes to see how well they fit into our big picture. And sometimes, the 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?

01:31

*Production and
Distribution through the
Eras

Red rock formations;
tractors turning gravel and
rock into roads*

(music playing) Production and distribution was not really a human concern in Era One, before modern humans evolved. But it was in this era that the materials, elements, and environment we use for production formed. As you'll see, the location of the Earth's sources of energy and natural resources will influence both which goods and services we produce and distribute and how we do this work.

01:59

*Timeline through Eras One
(our big history) and Two
(Early Humans)*

We really begin the story of human production and distribution in Era Two, hundreds of thousands of years ago. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors used what they found in their environment to make everything they needed, including food, simple clothing, and items for recreation. Then they shared these with others in small family groups. Within this era, about 12,000 years ago, the first farming societies developed.

02:27

*An painting of a human
using an animal for work
Photos of: early iron tools;
a weaving loom; cotton
plants*

Farming was a new system of production, and drove humans to modified ways of distributing goods and services. In addition to hunting and gathering, early agricultural systems of production required people to domesticate, or control, plants and animals. Production became specialized as we learned to create iron tools, weave or spin cloth from animal wool or plant cotton. These skills required knowledge and expertise, and it was nearly impossible to master more than one or two of these crafts.

03:00

*Image of a hand-thrown
piece of pottery; carved
tools; a woven textile*

Through these changes, a division of labor developed. Some people became specialists in certain crafts or services, such as pottery, weaving, metalworking, and even providing protection. This process continued over time and grew even more intense as more and more people worked in areas outside of food production, as you will study across Eras Three and Four.

03:27

Photo montage: old coins used for payment; drawing of an early trade map

New systems of distribution evolved to move and trade goods created in one place to other places. These systems were often along routes covering great distances that required many steps and many participants. The use of money emerged to help govern trading and taxation and investment to help make it all possible.

Between at least 600 C.E. and 1450 C.E., trade routes connected producers and consumers across large regions of the world, patterns of production and distribution that we'll examine in Era Four. These systems of production and distribution were not always growing. Sometimes, they collapsed and became less complex, at least for a while.

04:13

World map with lines showing distribution routes in the Americas and throughout Africa, Europe, and Asia

But recovery followed collapse, and by around 1300—early in Era Five—two great systems of distribution emerged: one in the Americas and the other connecting much of Africa, Europe, and Asia. Then, around 1500, these two systems were connected in the Columbian Exchange, the first global age.

Now, despite these changes in production and the growth in distribution networks, the ways people created the goods had changed only gradually in thousands of years. People learned to make things better, but only bit-by-bit and without many major changes. As they had for thousands of years, people depended upon biology and the environment to provide the energy needed to produce and distribute the goods and services.

04:53

*The Long Nineteenth Century
Black-and-white images of early industrial systems and of workers at an early factory
A steam ship that can now transfer goods*

Then, about 200 years ago, in Era Six, suddenly, everything changed again. Human use of fossil fuels created an energy bonanza that helped create the Industrial Revolution. This fundamentally transformed the amount of work that could be done, who did it, and where it was done. As a result, the very ways we lived transformed. Work shifted from farms 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, creating vast global markets for goods.

Over the last hundred years or so, events you'll study in Era Seven, the changes prompted by industrialism changed not only the type of work people do, it also revolutionized our understanding of and ability to produce goods, including the food we eat. We have more things than our ancestors did—many more.

05:49

*Images of ubiquitous chain restaurants that are now around the world (Starbucks and McDonalds)
Black-and-white photo of Women working in a factory*

We also tend to have more physical objects in common with other people around the world, like the same brands of cell phones, sodas, and coffee. These changes also altered labor, the role that laborers play, and the type of labor needed. For example, most of us don't know how the things in our pockets were made or where they came from. Nor do we know how to make them or even how to fix them. New occupations developed to provide services to others—service jobs, such as repairing products or selling goods that others produce.

06:24

*Using the Production and
Distribution Frame*

(music playing) This Big Story began billions of years ago, as the Earth formed, and takes us right up to this very moment. And I told you the story in just a few minutes. This story framed major changes in the ways we produced and distributed all the goods and the services we use.

Bob Bain

How might you use this Big Picture? Can it help you locate individual events in time? Does it offer a way to think about trends, or help you assess the strength and weaknesses of our current system of production and our global system of distribution? Are we better or worse than when communities produced most of what they needed for themselves? Do you think we are happier than our ancestors were? Can we say we've made progress? And what has been the cost of all of this innovation in production and distribution? These questions and others about production and distribution can help us make sense of the global past.