



Unit 4 Overview

Industrialization and political revolutions combined in unexpected ways. Together, they created the potential for liberation and better working conditions. Yet not everybody could enjoy these benefits, and indeed, the world became a more complicated and difficult place for many. Reformers sought to expand the benefits of new, modern living to new communities. But in many cases, the promise of reform wasn't realized for a long time, and in some cases it never succeeded.



00:01

*Kim Lochner and Colby
Burnett in conversation*

Okay, so—ready to do the video?

I protest.

What?

Just practicing.

Oh—okay, you mean with all the strikes and revolts and demonstrations we’re going to discuss?

Yeah, that too.

Colby Burnett

Uh-huh.

*A montage of artworks
show political meetings,
laborers, and people
working on what will
become the railroad*

Hi, I’m Colby Burnett, and along with Kim Lochner, we’re introducing Unit 4—Transformation of Labor and Social Relations. So far, we have seen how changing political identities after 1750 set in motion a modern world of sovereign nation-states and citizens with political rights. And we’ve observed how the Industrial Revolution transformed humanity by creating new ways of living and working.

00:45

*Painting depicts a war
between white settlers and
indigenous peoples*

But we also know that both of these transformations had limits. Not everybody enjoyed the same political rights. And industrialization meant different things for different people in different places. These two revolutions in politics and production sometimes interacted in unexpected ways. In some cases, they worked together to create change. In others, they rubbed up against each other and created results that nobody planned for.

*An anti-slavery artwork
depicts a man with his
hands tied; the artwork
reads: “am I not a man and
a brother?”*

In this unit, we focus on some of those unexpected consequences. We investigate—how did the Industrial Revolution and political revolutions transform the way people worked, lived, and learned in the long 19th century? How did all of these changes contribute to creating the world we live in today? Any answer to these questions must include two linked elements of all human societies—how we work, and what our relations are with each other. We must also take into account how the modern world began to create the categories of identity that we all take for granted today such as race, class, and gender.

*Photo of women fighting
for voting rights*

01:47

*Kim Lochner.
Portraits of women;
a horse-drawn truck
advertises the “National
American Woman Suffrage
Association”; photos of
suffragettes protesting*

These social revolutions were evident in both the home and public space. Women often took the lead. In many countries, women were unwilling to let liberal and national revolutions pass them by. They demanded political rights through movements for suffrage—or the right to vote. Like many struggles for social transformation, this fight was long and hard. In the 19th century, some women won the right to vote. But this only included women who owned land.

They could vote in local elections in places as far flung as Argentina, Colombia, some U.S. states, Sweden, and South Australia. But it was only in the early 20th century that full women’s suffrage really started to come into effect. It began in New Zealand and Finland and slowly spread. In every case, women’s suffrage was only achieved because women—and some male allies—fought for it.

02:49

Montage: art and photographs that depict the devastating impacts of racism in this time period

Women also led many movements to challenge one of the most destructive institutions of the long 19th century—the ordering of the world along racial lines. Prior to 1750, there was racism, which presented in many ways, including in hierarchies and slavery based on race. But in this era, these ideas solidified into the modern systems of eugenics and white supremacy. These ideas had devastating impacts in the decades that followed, and continue to oppress people today. Social revolutions in this era led to a broad-based fight against these ideas and against the institutions of slavery.

03:36

*Colby Burnett.
Portraits of Frederick Douglass and Olaudah Equiano; photo of Phyllis Wheatly's book "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral";
Painting of slaves working on a plantation*

We mostly know the names of the men who led the fight against slavery—men like Frederick Douglass in the United States and Olaudah Equiano in the United Kingdom. But many of the movement's unsung heroes were women, such as the African-American activist/writer Phyllis Wheatley.

In early 19th century Britain, housewives refused to buy sugar grown on plantations worked by enslaved people. Their boycott was crucial to ending the legal enslavement of human beings in the British Empire. Women's leadership in these reform movements ultimately challenged assumptions about gender roles. Women defied being forced out of public life and having limited social, as well as political, rights.

04:13

Photograph of a small child working in a factory; a painting of boys sitting in a school; another drawing of a girls' school

Social reformers also became concerned with children. Were they to be factory workers, subject to terrible conditions and low pay? Should they be sent to school to be shaped to society's needs, or be allowed to play? Changing norms in our understanding of gender and childhood permanently shifted how communities defined themselves in this era. These social reforms were linked to economic issues. Labor, women's rights, and the roles of children were all challenged by the Industrial Revolution's transformation of the way we work and our systems of production and distribution.

04:45

Kim Lochner

Photos of early factories – they are quite dark and very crowded; young children are covered in soot from working in a factory

Industrialization turned more and more people—women, men, and children—into wage laborers. They worked in factories, farms, or offices for a weekly or hourly wage. Much of the world's population now formed a working class, people who sold their labor because they had nothing else to sell. They were paid for their work and used that pay to buy consumer goods made by others. In other words, wage laborers helped stimulate the free market economic system—the capitalist system. This transformation to paid work helped eliminate the legal status of slavery in much of the world. But the capitalist free market economy also often featured low pay and terrible working conditions. Many formerly enslaved people now found themselves working for meager wages.

05:40

Colby Burnett

Photos of labor protests meetings

Only by organizing did laborers find ways to demand reforms. These demands increased as the long 19th century progressed and they introduced the world to socialism, a system that sought to give workers control. Socialist ideas helped spark revolutions in Mexico and Russia. The struggle over which system was better—capitalism or socialism—continues to the present day.

This debate about production and labor was very evident in the British Caribbean colonies. In 1750 this was a society based on the labor of enslaved Africans. A middle class of overseers ran things for a ruling class of plantation owners.

Art that depicts the wealthy overseers is contrasted with artwork showing enslaved Africans working on plantations

06:37

Photo of an 1834 newspaper with the headline "Eight hundred thousand slaves set free!!"
Kim Lochner
Photographs of Indian indentured servants

Photo of workers on a sugar plantation

07:53

Photographs of men working in sugar factories

08:12

Kim Lochner and Colby Burnett in conversation

The enslaved workers experienced racism, danger, and violence. All the while they harvested and processed sugar that was in high demand in Europe and around the world. The promises of political rights were strong in Britain itself, yet they were almost completely absent from this colonial society. But pressure for reform grew, both from the enslaved people and from political liberals in Britain.

Less than a century later, in 1834, Britain abolished slavery in its colonies. Of course, the plantation owners still needed laborers. But the formerly enslaved didn't want to work on plantations. They mostly wanted to grow food on their own land or start businesses.

In response, plantation owners imported workers from other regions, especially India. These Indian workers were not legally enslaved, but rather indentured—contractually obligated to work for their employer for a period of years. Enslavement and indentured servitude often looked pretty similar, though. The workers were treated terribly. They were confined to estates, brutally punished for any infraction, and paid pitiful amounts.

In response, by the late 1840s, Indian workers started to demand reforms. They wanted to be treated better and paid more. Conditions improved only gradually. Plantation owners often tried to pit the formerly enslaved African workers against newly conscripted workers from India by offering one group advantages over the other. Eventually, workers united across the color line. Slowly, they achieved reforms.

But labor in the sugar plantations of the Caribbean remained a difficult and underpaid job well into the 20th century, when machines took over much of the work. The situation in the British Caribbean mirrors the process of social and labor reforms elsewhere.

The Industrial Revolution and political revolutions together created the potential for great opportunities for all kinds of people. Capitalism held the promise of allowing people to prosper in a free market and free labor economy. But reality was often much darker, and the fight for reform and change could only come through prolonged struggle. Those struggles, as much as anything, helped to create the world in which we live today.

So much progress.

And oppression.

And struggle.

And achievements!

Eh, it's like the usual history stuff, but now it's industrial strength.

Oh, how long have you been saving that one?

I just thought of it.

Right.