Unit 1 Overview: The World in 1750

By Trevor Getz

To find meaning in the massive political, economic and social transformations that occurred between 1750 and 1914, we must understand their starting point: The world in 1750.

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In this course, we study change and continuity over time, from about 1750 to today. It's a shorter period of time than it sounds. There are sharks alive today that were born before 1750. Our planet is 4.5 billion years old, and our species is 250,000 years old. The earliest written sources we have for human history are more than 5,000 years old. So, 270-ish years is really not a very long time.

Studying the recent past can be especially useful for understanding change and continuity in a way that makes it meaningful and usable. By studying patterns of what changes, for whom it changes, and how it changes, we find meaning within the evidence. In this course, we give you lots of evidence about continuity and change between 1750 and now. We hope you can develop your own explanations based on this evidence, and that what you find will help you understand the world you live in today and make decisions for the future.

To make this kind of meaning of the past, and to understand continuity and change over the last 270 years or so, you have to know where you're starting. How can you tell what has changed if you don't have a picture of what things were like before? So unit one is all about the period in which the course begins, the years around 1750.

We can begin our story of the year 1750 by looking at a narrative, or a story about continuity and change, that for a long time was believed by most historians. The thing about world history is that there are narratives that try to give us a single, simplified story about the shared past of everyone, everywhere.

In this case of 1750, the narrative most historians believed for a long time was the "Rise of the West." It was developed mostly by historians from countries in Europe and North America, also known as the "West." So, it's not surprising that the narrative focuses on the rise of these regions of the world. The story begins by suggesting that up until about 1750, wealth and power were pretty evenly distributed in several parts of the world, including China, Europe, and elsewhere. But soon afterward, the story goes, Europe and its overseas colonies in North America began to dominate the world. This change sped up in the twentieth century, so that the "West" still occupies a dominant position in world affairs today.

Or does it? This narrative has been around for a while, partly because it has some evidence behind it and partly because powerful people want to believe it. It also needs to be tested using evidence, though. Is this narrative really an accurate explanation of what has happened over the years since 1750? Or is it the product of a group of Western historians looking at the past from one perspective, and missing the broader patterns?
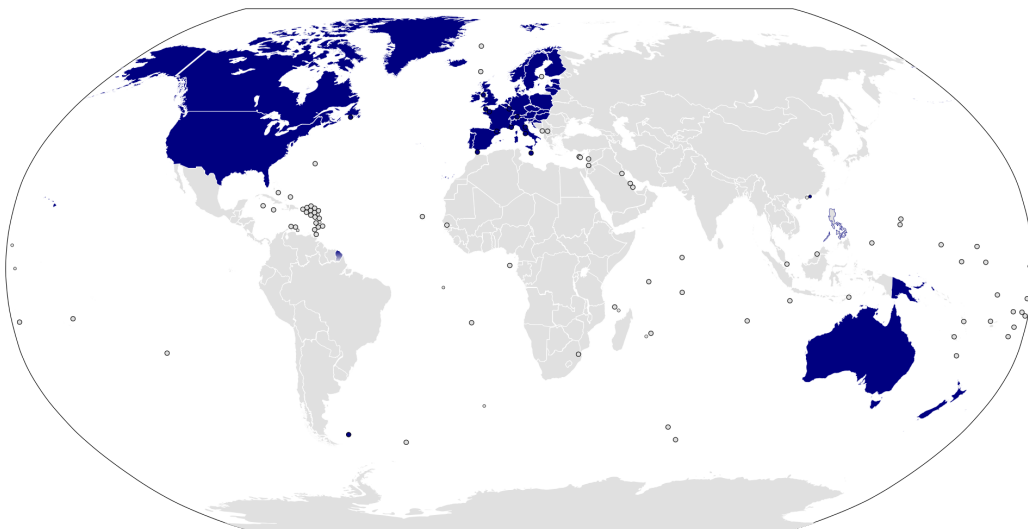
A map of the so-called Western World. Careful observers will notice some problems with calling these places "the West". By Concus Cretus, CC BY-SA 4.0.

As you learned in the first lesson, two scholars, Bob Bain and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, have suggested ways for us to understand the problems of a narrative like this one.

It's just as important for you to actually look at the evidence used in this course though. Armed with evidence, you will be able to support, extend, or critique this narrative by viewing the world in the year 1750 through three frames. Each of these frames is like a filter through which we can look at the evidence from a unique perspective.

Communities: A world of states and identities

Through a series of articles, we will explore the variety of human communities in 1750. We will encounter everything from small states to vast empires. Some empires had existed for centuries, such as the Ottoman Empire in North Africa and around the Mediterranean. In China, the Qing Dynasty was relatively new, but it ruled a vast and ancient state. In the Atlantic, small European states were busily building large, oceanic empires.

We will see how people in states of all sizes identified as members of religious communities. There were widespread religions like Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism that spanned many countries, as well as religious communities that appeared in little pockets across many states, like Judaism. We all have layers of identity that shape how we understand the world and our place in it, and so did the people of 1750. This course will bring those layers of identity into clearer view.

Production and distribution: Doing business globally

People's lives were also shaped through their participation in systems of *production and distribution*. In 1750, the word *economics* had not even been invented, but people everywhere had already been making or growing things, trading or selling them. We will see how most of what was made or grown was still produced by families or small groups of people and consumed by them or their neighbors. However, there was also trade and commerce like never before. In fact, by this period, there were companies whose reach, for the first time, spanned the world.

There is plenty of evidence that, in terms of production and distribution, the "West" was not in the driver's seat at this time. Indeed, large Western companies existed in part because Europeans wanted access to the wealth of Asia. India was the world's largest producer of cloth. Even more desirable were the fine goods produced by the Qing state of China, the world's largest economy in 1750.

Portrait of an East India Company official, likely William Fullerton of Rosemount, who joined the East India Company's service in 1744. He became mayor of Calcutta in 1757. By Dip Chand, circa 1764, Public Domain.

Networks: Connections across and around the world

You will assemble a picture of production and distribution in 1750 by looking at the economies of different regions of the world as well as some evidence of global patterns. Thinking about patterns gets even more interesting, because that is what leads us to thinking about networks. The more you look into them, these economic patterns will start to mirror the networks of ideas, culture, and language that connected people across regions.

Those networks were key to bringing together many different concepts, innovations, and cultural ideas in some regions at this time. Cities became centers where people and worldviews met and mixed. For example, the creole cities of the Americas were inhabited by a mix of Native American, African, and European cultures.

In western Europe, knowledge brought back by merchants and other travelers from many parts of the world created the conditions for intellectual leaps and political changes, and we'll jump into that in the next unit.

The next three units will all focus on massive transformations – political, economic, and social – that occurred between 1750 and 1914. To evaluate and find meaning in these changes, we must understand their starting point, in 1750. That starting point is the purpose of this unit.

Trevor Getz

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Image credits

Cover: A Senior Merchant of the Dutch East India Company, Ê Jacob Mathieusen and his Wife. Behind them, a Slave Holds a Pajong. The Dutch East India Company ships ready to sail home, in the background is the City of Batavia., Aelbert Cuyp, c. 1640 - c. 1660. © Sepia Times/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

A map of the so-called Western World. Careful observers will notice some problems with calling these places "the West". By Concus Cretus, CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Western_world_Samuel_P_Huntington.svg

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