

AP World History Course Themes

Theme 1 – Interaction Between Humans and the Environment

- Demography and disease
- Migration
- Patterns of settlement
- Technology

The interaction between humans and the environment is a fundamental theme for world history. Humans interacted with the environment during prehistory as hunters, fishers, and foragers whose migrations led to the peopling of the earth. As the agricultural revolution began, humans intensified their exploitation of the environment as either farmers or pastoralists, while simultaneously constrained by environmental factors such as rainfall patterns, climate, and available flora and fauna. This exploitation intensified as populations grew, migrated, and later increased exponentially during the Industrial Revolution. As industrialization expanded, human impact on the environment – and the ability to master and exploit it – came primarily from the development of increasingly sophisticated technology. As people flocked into cities or established trade networks, new disease emerged and spread, sometimes threatening to destroy a civilization. By the twentieth century, large numbers of humans had begun to recognize their impact on the environment and took steps toward a “green” movement to protect and work with the natural world instead of exploiting it.

Theme 2 – Development and Interaction of Cultures

- Religions
- Belief systems, philosophies, and ideologies
- Science and technology
- The arts and architecture

This theme explores the origins, uses, dissemination, and syncretic adaptations of ideas, beliefs, and knowledge within particular societies and in circulation across societies. Studying a society’s belief system(s) or religions, philosophical interests, and technical and artistic approaches is key to understanding how the society views itself and others and how it responds to multiple challenges. When people of different societies interact, they often share components of their cultures, deliberately or not. The processes of adopting or adapting new belief and knowledge systems are complex and often lead to historically novel cultural blends. A society’s culture may be investigated and then compared with other societies’ cultures as a way of examining uniqueness and commonalities of human expressions and abilities. It is also possible to analyze cultural trends and trace their influence across human societies.

Theme 3 – State-building, Expansion, and Conflict

- Political structures and forms of governance
- Empires
- Nations and nationalism
- Revolts and revolutions
- Regional, trans-regional, and global structures and organizations

The theme of state-building, expansion, and conflict refers to the processes by which hierarchical systems of rule have been constructed and maintained and to the

conflicts generated through such processes. In particular, this theme encourages the comparative study of different state forms (for example, kingdoms, empires, nation-states) across time and space and interactions between them. Continuity and change are also embedded in this theme through attention to the organizational and cultural foundations of long-term stability on the one hand and to internal and external causes of conflict on the other. Students are encouraged to contextualize state development and expansion in relation to various productive strategies (for example, agrarian, pastoral, mercantile), to various cultural and ideological foundations (for example, religions, philosophies, ideas of nationalism), and to various social and gender structures. This theme also encompasses interstate relations, including warfare, diplomacy, and the formation of international organizations.

Theme 4 – Creation, Expansion, and Interaction of Economic Systems

- Agricultural and pastoral production
- Trade and commerce
- Labor systems
- Industrialization
- Capitalism and socialism

This theme surveys the diverse patterns and systems that human societies have developed to produce, distribute, and consume desired goods and services across time and space. It stresses major transitions in human economic activity such as the growth and spread of agricultural, pastoral, and industrial production; the development of various labor systems associated with these economic systems; and the ideologies, values, and institutions (such as capitalism and socialism) that sustain them. This theme also calls attention to patterns of trade and commerce between various societies, with particular attention to the relation between regional and global networks of communication and exchange and their relation to economic growth. These webs of interaction strongly influence cultural and technological diffusion, migration, state formation, social classes, and human interaction with the environment.

Theme 5 – Development and Transformation of Social Structures

- Gender roles and relations
- Family and kinship
- Racial and ethnic constructions
- Social and economic classes

All human societies develop ways of grouping their members and norms of interaction across social groups. Social stratification comprises distinctions based on gender roles, kinship systems, racial and ethnic associations, and hierarchies of wealth and class. The study of world history requires analysis of the processes through which such categories and practices were created, maintained, and transformed. It also involves analysis of the connections between changes in social structures and other historical shifts, especially trends in political economy, cultural expression, and human ecology.