The Ideology of Progress I: from 1400s to 1800s

Renaissance

- Broad cultural movement following the medieval period, beginning around 1400 in Italy and spreading north.
- Humanism: “the proper study of man is man.”
- Close study of classical Greek and Roman culture – thus incorporating the greatest aspects of the past.
- New arts, philosophy, and theology.
- This is a “Rebirth” after the darkness of the “Middle Ages.”

Reformation

- Break from the Catholic Church by “Protestants,” especially Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-64).
- “New/old and true Christianity”: Protestants considered themselves superior in:
  - avoiding the corruptions of the Catholic Church;
  - being true religion versus the magic and superstition of Catholicism;
  - returning the believer to a more direct and personal relationship with God;
  - a paradoxical combination of intensified sense of sinfulness and being the “elect” for divine salvation.

Colonialism

- Late 1400s to 1950s.
- European powers gain military, political, and economic control of other continents, generating great wealth.
- Includes a belief that such power showed the superiority of European culture and thus justified conquest.
- Also includes the belief that colonialism actually benefited those who were dominated by bringing to them a higher civilization: “white man’s burden.”

The rise of science

- 1600s: Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton usher in a new era in human history: modern science.
- Modern science gives us new and unquestioned knowledge about the world, as well as previously unknown power to control nature for human well-being.
- Through science we become “masters and possessors of nature“ (Rene Descartes), which is our proper role.

The Enlightenment

- European and North American intellectual movement, particularly the 1700s.
- Belief that they brought the light of civilization to a culture in the darkness of authoritarian faith, superstition, religious wars, & witch hunts.
- Optimism concerning knowledge (reason & science), technology (new technology is inherently good), society (movement toward democracy & away from monarchy), material well being (from technological and social advances)
Positive view of the future. Change is positive development. That which is new is better.

The Ideology of Progress

- **Exceptionalism**: The belief that Europe is unique in technological, social, and moral achievement and is an exception to the limitations and constraints of other cultures.
- **Expansionism**: This belief in superiority rationalizes the expansion of European culture and power, however destructive.
- **Triumphalism**: The belief that European culture does and should triumph as part of history. Europe considers itself the pinnacle of civilization in virtually every aspect of human culture.
- **Progress**: The expansion of European culture is by definition progress. This is both moral progress and the inherent direction of history. It is both inevitable and a duty.

Early American colonial period

- Puritan settlers believe they are leaving a spiritually degenerate country on a pilgrimage to establish a true Christian land, as part of the history of Christianity’s triumph on Earth.
- Nature in the “New World” is paradoxical: it is a “howling wasteland” but it also has the potential to become a new Garden of Eden if we control it.

Early United States

- The American Revolution (1775-1783) establishes the United States as the forefront of the new political ideal of democracy and the application of Enlightenment ideals.
- The wilderness west of the 13 states is needed to spread this progress.
- 1803: President Jefferson sends Lewis & Clark to explore the continent and purchases from France the “Louisiana Territory,” from New Orleans to Montana, doubling the size of the U.S.

Nature makes America great

- Early American culture displays an inferiority complex in relation to Europe, which has a far more developed and long-standing cultural tradition.
- In response, the 1800s sees a spreading belief that the vast wilderness of the continent makes America exceptional and even superior to Europe.
- At the same time, many believe that we are called to expand into the wilderness, settle in it and “improve” it.

The geographical march of history

- In *The Earth and Man* (1851), geographer Guyot seeks to “comprehend the purposes of God as to the destinies of nations” by studying the relationship between physical geography and human development.
- He concludes that civilization is most advanced in the temperate regions, progressing west from the Middle East into Europe, which has now exhausted its ability to progress.
The next stage is found farther west in America, which now has the special role of continuing this progress.

**Manifest Destiny**

- Term coined in 1845 by John O’Sullivan: it is “the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by [Divine] Providence.”
- The term was used by Congress to support invading Mexico and seizing the land now known as Texas.
- Used later for the taking other territories, including California and the Philippines.

**Exceptionalism**: The United States has a special place in history, at the forefront of history’s march toward progress, which is a duty given to us by God. This further justifies expansion.

**Expansionism**: The United States should expand toward the West. This is justified because it “develops” that which is being wasted. It is inherently an improvement.

**Triumphalism**: The West is something to be “won.” Victory itself proves expansion is justified.

**Those “in the way”** (wilderness, wolves, Native Americans) are victims of the march of history, not injustice. That process is inevitable and good.