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Topic Essay 2: Progress, Empires and Nations

When the term progress is used, the definition can describe a movement toward a goal or a higher stage; an advancement or the development of a society in a direction considered more beneficial than and superior to the previous level. Especially regarding the latter part, progress accurately becomes one of the main goals and visions that an empire or nation desires to pan out on their conquered peoples. This essay will address how the use of nations and empires as historical lenses impacts the understanding of progress throughout time.

One of the many recurring themes in this unit of study (if not the central theme) is imperialism; many regions across Europe were building up and modernizing their civilizations via industrialization and naturally, the conquest of additional lands were sought upon for obtaining more resources, engaging in a multicultural economy, etc¹. Due to the effect that imperialism played on influencing an empire's culture over the people subjected, there can be two general ways of looking at how progression shaped the history of the region in question.

The first way of looking at progression is in the accounts of a nation being conquered or weakened. In this case, China was being exploited by foreigners in the mid-1800s despite their stubbornness to remain isolated, tending to its traditional values². Nonetheless, China's reluctance into accepting technology and modernization led them to being easily defeated in the Opium wars. As a result of their losses, Chinese rulers had to be forced to open up trade centers via treaties which resulted in not only the transport of foreign goods into the region but missionaries as well (who brought with them Christianity and other ideals that clashed with

traditional Chinese customs). Overall, this scenario impacts our view of progression as one that comes out of forcefulness and intruding of one's lifestyle in favor of changing and eventually displacing that lifestyle with a more modernized, if not radical one. The current affairs of the Chinese economy and its urban landscape deeply reflect the aftermath of this progression.

The second way of looking at progression of history is in the perspective of the conquerors themselves. Through the imperialistic era, a new idealism came about which added to the need for expansionism (both for land and spread of culture). This idealism was modeled on the belief that Europe was the centralist society in the world, boasting modern technology and systems of resources and the adaption of Christianity. Due to these factors, European empires would invade and capture territories on the grounds of Social Darwinism³. Some to most empires would go further and "civilize" the people under control and other "barbarians" under the empire's modernistic ways. This brought forth a new kind of progression and through the eyes of the British Empire, for example, this came at a price. Indigenous peoples of the Americas would be subjected to slavery (as well as Africans) to help boost the New World economy; Britain, in particular would especially benefit from the cotton production of the southern colonies⁴. Eventually, this kind of progression seen in the Americas (as imposed by empires) would be the forerunner of important historical events. The American Revolution would rise from the opposition of the people subjected by Britain's economic progress in the form of high taxation and later, the Civil War would sprout from the U.S. progression of the use of slavery in the Southern economy.

The previous two claims that I have provided described the way progress is viewed from the perspective of an empire (Britain) and a region being “invaded” (China). In a unique case, here is a scenario where a nation did the most of their situation: Japan. After being forced to open for trade by the U.S. (from which Japan has been effectively sealed for 200 years), its people looked at their impressively advanced adversaries and took notes on becoming like them. What resulted was a dramatic change in Japan’s society; once seen as a civilization centered around traditional customs such as the samurai and fishing, Japan became an empire in its own right⁵. The ensuing progression led to Japan adopting western technology (from city planning all the way to weaponry) and modernizing its economy. Eventually, like Europe, as Japan grew, so did its need for resources which led to its expansion into Asia. Unfortunately, Japanese conquerors and top leaders instilled the racist notion that Japan was the master Asian race (similar to how Germany would later proclaim that they were the master Aryan race). What followed through this vision was the annexation of lands in China and Korea as well as the atrocities in killing many of its civilians⁶.

As previously stated in the paper, there are many examples that illustrate the understanding of what progression is in terms of the historic aftermath that led to the basis of what today’s society is modeled on. Whether it is looked from the perspective of a culture being invaded, an empire invading a culture, or a culture becoming an empire invading a culture, our understanding of progress in history is shaped by multiple perspectives. Along the same lines, using these empires and nations as historical lens can be somewhat misleading⁷. To elaborate, an empire may seek to provide written accounts that reflect bias and arrogant claims that are otherwise untrue. Although already elaborated enough in the weekly discussion, cases like this in

history yields the two roles of agency and passivity where each gives us, a learner of history, a different scope on how things proceeded in a given time. Whatever the manner in which we use to describe our understanding, the interpretations are multifold.

Foot Note Sources

1. <http://www2.sunysuffolk.edu/westn/imperialism.html> (timeline)
2. http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/opium_wars_01/ow1_essay01.html (timeline)
3. “The ‘Great Divergence’ in World History”
4. “‘The Politics of Cotton’— The World by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto”
5. <http://hnn.us/article/2746> (timeline)
6. “Rescuing History from the Nation”
7. “National History and the World of Nations”