

Periodization

Primary Source Analysis

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John Gast's *American Progress* (1872) is one of the most well-studied visual representations of Manifest Destiny, an ideology used predominantly by white Americans to justify and explain the continental expansion of the United States during the nineteenth century. George Crofutt commissioned the image as a chromolithographic companion to his popular *Western World* traveller's guidebook, and he was so impressed with it that he made it the frontispiece.¹ In Crofutt's view, the image illustrated the nation's incredible transformation over the century, where American 'grandeur and enterprise' had 'cause[d] the mighty wilderness to blossom like the rose!!!'.²

Crofutt's praise suggests why this source is useful for considering periodization in American history. The image can be analysed as a visual representation of feelings and ideas associated with the era of Manifest Destiny; it showcases economic and technological changes that are sometimes connected to notions of a nineteenth-century 'Market' or 'Transportation Revolution' and illustrates America's emergence as a transcontinental industrial powerhouse. However, *American Progress* offers a sanitized vision of the displacement of Native people that allowed for coast-to-coast white settlement, showing bloodless flight rather than coercion, deceit and violence. By the end of the nineteenth century, (most) white Americans viewed the 'battle' between 'civilization' and 'savagery' as essentially complete.³ As Crofutt cheerfully explained, 'Fleeing from "Progress" ... are Indians, buffaloes, wild horses, bears, and other game, moving Westward, ever Westward, the Indians with their squaws, papooses, and "pony lodges" turn their despairing faces towards, as they flee the wondrous vision.'⁴

There are wider issues with periodization when contextualizing the material. The image was crafted just seven years after the extraordinary violence of the US Civil War (1861–5), and towards the later stages of



FIGURE 1 George A. Crofutt, *American Progress*, c. 1873. Photograph. After 1872, painting of the same title by John Gast. <https://www.loc.gov/item/97507547/>.

Reconstruction (1863–77), when white terrorists were violently resisting the revolutionary transformations that accompanied the abolition of slavery, including Black male suffrage. Should we then interpret this image as marking a distinct break from the ‘Civil War Era’, as part of ‘Reconstruction’, or as reflecting broader postwar changes, similar to the ‘Antebellum/Postbellum’ framing used by some historians? Might we see the image as representing shifting attitudes and ideas associated with the ‘Gilded Age and Progressive Era’, or should we consider it as indicative of how attitudes associated with Manifest Destiny extended through the nineteenth century? Does the image’s context instead require a spatial-chronological framework, where importance is placed on the conquest of the ‘West’, the closing of the ‘Frontier’, and the defeat of the Native American polities and groups which populated this space?⁵ Decisions about how to contextualize and interpret the image thus require engaging with different ways of framing American history, and thinking through the analytical significance of periodization.

The term Manifest Destiny was coined in 1845 by John L. O’Sullivan, a New York magazine editor, as part of his campaign for the annexation of Texas into the US after it had secured independence from Mexico, but the idea that divine providence justified and explained American expansionism had a much longer history.⁶ Gast’s picture, with its imagery of progress

and development, serves as a visual representation of notions of Manifest Destiny in the later nineteenth century; it signifies that the capture of the continent was near complete, and a new age of American power was beginning. A sexualized female figure (sometimes described as Columbia, sometimes as Liberty), represents 'Progress'; her classical dress speaks to the links American contemporaries made between the republics of antiquity (Greece and Rome) and their own, but it is an unabashedly 'modern' image, too.⁷ She holds a 'common school' book in one hand, and a telegraph wire in another, while her head is adorned with the Star of Empire. 'Progress' is accompanied by farmers, miners, settlers and travellers – all of whom are fully clothed men – and whose steady progress from east to west is transforming the region and establishing American hegemony. To the far right, farmers till the field; ahead of them miners, settlers and frontiersmen move over rough terrain that will soon be equally settled. The leading figure's shotgun hints at the violence that underpinned this movement. The image equates progress with the taming of the frontier and signifies the belief that Americans had made Manifest Destiny a reality in this era.

The imagery associated with economic and technological developments also speaks to a developing industrial age. The invention of the electric telegraph in 1844 ushered in a communications revolution and set America on the path to becoming a transcontinental major power.⁸ In planting telegraph poles and wires, 'Progress' underlines how far this revolution underpinned American expansion westward, marking a distinct break from the past to the present, and enabling the future growth of the United States. The distinction between different modes of transportation in the image similarly points to America's emergence as an industrial force across this period. In the east, we see factories, wharves and ships indicating trade, commerce and immigration. Moving from east to west, and accompanying 'Progress', we see a covered wagon bringing families, a pony express rider, an overland mail carriage and three locomotives chugging across to establish American hegemony. They have not reached the coast, but their progress is assured and the Natives have no choice but to flee from their path. As Peter Shulman states, 'The story of the painting is clear: American progress and technological progress are one and the same'.⁹ The picture therefore represents the United States' nineteenth-century transition to a muscular and increasingly confident industrial power.

This image might also be used to understand actions associated with 'Indian Removal' and the longer histories of US expansion and violence towards Native Americans. Here, what is *not* shown is crucial. The image of Native Americans fleeing 'westward, ever westward', on account of 'Progress' belies the violent or even genocidal nature of nineteenth-century US expansionism.¹⁰ Scholars often speak of distinct stages to these actions, even while recognizing continuities between different modes of repression.¹¹ We might consider how the image connects to specific periods of conflict. Scholars sometimes discuss conflict between the US and Native Americans across the

‘West’ between the 1850s and 1890s using labels such as the ‘American-Indian Wars’ or the ‘Plains Wars’. This terminology emphasizes continuities in experiences, motives and outcomes in these conflicts between the US and Native Americans in the American West, with historians sometimes marking the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890) as the ‘end’ of the war. Increasingly, however, historians question the framing of these encounters as ‘war’, or ‘battles’, given the defining role of American aggression and the power imbalance involved.¹²

The image thus stands amidst a period of violent conflict and ethnic cleansing, while the ultimate victory of the US was not yet assured. However, there is little evidence of this violence beyond the aforementioned shotgun. Representations of the conquest of the West, and the triumph of ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’ over ‘savagery’, deliberately elide the violence of this conquest. That said, we can engage with the image of buffalo skeletons in order to interrogate different forms of violence. White Americans’ near-extermination of buffalo played a fundamental role in destroying the subsistence base of Plains politics and facilitating the expansion of the US, with Native peoples forcibly relocated to reservations.¹³ This image therefore not only represents American perceptions of progress, notions of technological innovation and expansionism, but also simultaneously underlines and elides the violence and brutality necessary for America to fulfil its ‘Manifest Destiny’.

Works cited

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- Peter Shulman, ‘Technology and US Foreign Relations in the Nineteenth Century’, in Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton (eds), *The Cambridge History of America and the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 337–61.

Notes

- 1 When teaching, the image is usually blown up to full screen, but most Americans would have encountered it in its original size, c. 12 3/4 x 16 3/4 inches. Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 1.
- 2 George A. Crofutt, 'George A. Crofutt Explains the Print "American Progress"', *SHEC: Resources for Teachers*: <https://shec.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1753> (accessed 23 August 2024).
- 3 On tensions over support for expansion, see Andrew C. Isenberg and Thomas Richards Jr., 'Alternative Wests', *Pacific Historical Review*, 86:1 (February 2017).
- 4 Crofutt, 'George A. Crofutt Explains the Print'.
- 5 Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood*, p. 1.
- 6 Nick Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 7 Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood*, pp. 1–4.
- 8 Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 1.
- 9 Peter Shulman, 'Technology and US Foreign Relations in the Nineteenth Century', in Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton (eds), *The Cambridge History of America and the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 339.
- 10 Benjamin Madley, 'Reexamining the American Genocide Debate: Meaning Historiography, and New Methods', *American Historical Review*, 120.1 (2015); Jeffrey Ostler, *Surviving Genocide: Native Nations and the United States from the American Revolution to Bleeding Kansas* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2019).
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- 12 Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 13 Carolyn Merchant, *American Environmental History: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 20.

Further reading

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 Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Use of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

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