

Colonization and the Story of Progress

Slack and Wise present one of the main components of the story of progress as the judgment and control of others. Within this point, they expound on the role of the story of progress in colonization. When Western European explorers stumbled upon cultures they did not understand in Africa, the Americas, and the South Seas, they immediately utilized the story of progress as a means to judge those peoples as civilized or, more often, primitive. The European settlers compared these cultures to their own, and surmised that because the people of Africa, the Americas and the South Seas had less technology than Europe. This meant that they had not progressed as far and were less civilized, therefore less intelligent, less cultured, and beneath Europeans. Slack and Wise then write that “Colonization of primitives was not merely justified, it was considered a moral responsibility; for with assistance primitives might be brought into the folds of a better, more evolved, civilized life” (Slack).

The example of colonization shows that even hundreds of years ago, technology was synonymous with progress. The false assumption that cultures with less technology were less cultured and needed saving would persist through the centuries. In 1899, Rudyard Kipling published his infamous poem “White Man’s Burden”. This poem, published at the start of the U.S.-Philippine War, called for the United States to “take up the White Man’s Burden” to serve their “captives’ needs”, describing the Filipinos, and all peoples outside the realm of conventional whiteness, as “half devil and half child” (Kipling 8). Both of Kipling’s descriptions of the other cultures exemplify the *derogatory* nature of the colonizers attempts to save other cultures, while judging them as inferior. Additionally, Slack and Wise described the goal of colonization to bring primitives into a “more evolved” life. The use of “evolved” evokes thoughts of Darwin’s Origin of Species, implying that the colonizers saw different cultures as not just less progressed technologically but less progressed along our evolutionary path. Furthermore, colonizers utilized the self righteous narrative of progress to detract from atrocities against other cultures; colonization was presented as a means to help lowly primitives when in reality it was a tool to control others. This can be related back to the U.S.-Philippine War. At the turn of the 20th century, the United States began imperialistic conquests reminiscent of those of Western Europe. The U.S. justified colonization of the Philippines, by claiming that they were saving these primitives from their Spanish overlords, as Spain had been in control of the Philippines. The Filipinos had brought about their own revolution against the Spanish, and did not want the U.S. taking Spain’s place. This was evident in the fact that Filipino revolutionaries fought against the U.S. troops that had been sent to the Philippines to battle Spanish forces. The United States’ attempts to bring the Filipino primitives into the fold of a more evolved life led to 20,000 Filipino troops being killed and 200,000 civilian casualties as a result of combat, hunger, or disease (Philippine-American War).