

The American Century
Underground Institute – May 3, 2017
Class 1: The Myth of Progress

The Big Picture: Every society enacts a *script*. We live by a set of taken-for-granted assumptions about reality, the earth, and human nature. Today we are scripted by capitalism, an ideology that presumes that the earth is an inexhaustible resource, and that the essence of human nature is self-interest and competition. Our basic operating assumption in this Underground Institute is that capitalism was birthed out of historical trauma. This unhealed trauma caused European peoples to dissociate from the earth, from communal life, even from their own bodies.

Neoliberalism is an extreme version of capitalism fueled by the growing power of corporations, the ideology that drives our present world, and thus our primary focus. We will learn what the “religion” of neoliberalism is, where it comes from, and how it shapes us. We will track how the ruling elites colluded to detach the modern economy from the real world and intentionally obscured the sources of their economic power for their own enrichment. We will also examine how they employed sophisticated propaganda and used clever euphemisms like “salvation,” “enlightenment,” “growth,” and “progress” to hoodwink the masses.

From local tribes to city-states to nation-states to a world dominated by multinational corporations, we will survey the path that has led us into a way of life that is seductive yet destructive. Neoliberal capitalism may be the air we breathe, but that is not a given, nor an inevitability.

I. The Ancient Story: Kinship Based Societies

- a. **Description:** Semi-nomadic hunting & gathering lifestyle; regenerative subsistence farming; symbiotic relationship with nature; gift economy (not based on money); oral tradition; matriarchal; organized in tribes, clans & bands.
- b. **The Story:** Human beings live within a community, the community is located within a bioregion, and the bioregion is a part of creation. The Spirit is present in & through all things. Everything and everybody is related (kinship), so expected to treat all with respect. Persons are “rewarded” when they care for the earth, care for one another, and live sustainability.

II. The Story of “Progress” (Act 1): Religion & Western City-State Empires (3000 BCE-1648 CE)

- a. **Description:** Intensive agriculture & concentrated settlements set off a cascading effect of greater control of food supply on one hand, and growing incompatibility with nature on the other. Increasing alienation from nature means intensifying conflict among humans who now try to control life & death. Surplus agriculture and the ensuing division of labor encourage and enable some to increase power over others, primarily in the form of city-states ruled by kings, priests, scribes and soldiers. Some developments: irrigation projects; storage of surplus crops; population growth, patriarchal & hierarchical; division of labor & class based society; money & transactional economy; emergence of writing for tracking debt; armies to protect surplus food & conquer new territory; slavery; centralization; walled cities with a palace & temple.
- b. **The Story:** The ruling class claim that the source of this new power is *God*. They say the sacred is now housed in the temple, and more generally within city walls, while chaos and disorder exist in the wilderness beyond. Plato provides the most convincing rationale for coercive power in his idea of dualism: the immaterial (disembodied spirit, mind, World of Forms) is divine while the material (flesh, body, nature) is fallen. Reality is ordered through a “Great Chain of Being.” God on top; then angels; then the king and the aristocracy; then free male citizens; then women, slaves & children; then the savage/pagans beyond the city gates; then animals; then plants; then minerals. Civilization is growing more complex & sophisticated, leaving more “primitive” ways behind. The centralized city-state is peddled as “good news” for all, even if people need to be converted by conquest. This “theology” is the primary ideological tool used to justify city-states.

- c. **The Economy:** Economics as a discipline first originates with the Greek philosopher Xenophon (430-354 BCE) who considered *oeconomicus* to be the art of “household management.” He later expanded that to include the whole city-state. City-states morphed into empires that grew through resource extraction (eg, tithes, taxes, tribute), but unlike today, this was not justified by the need for economic growth. The new regime simply claimed that “God” ordained them with power.
- d. **Resistance/Alternatives:** The early Israelites defected from the city-states of their time and returned to kinship based village life in the Palestinian highlands, practicing subsistence agriculture, redistributing resources, and following YHWH, the God who called them out of Egyptian slavery. This “little tradition” inspired the prophets, Jesus, the Apostle Paul, the Desert Fathers, and many other faithful to embark on similar movements in their times. They focused on challenging exploitative power arrangements, while renewing kinship ties and returning to village life. Elsewhere, in areas of the world not yet touched by centralizing empire, tribal and village ways of life remained the norm.
- e. **Ideological collapse:** The way of Jesus was co-opted by Constantine in 313 CE, forming a new theological justification for empire - Christendom, the domain of Christ. Rome was sacked by the Huns in 410 and officially came to an end in 476, but its legacy of the imperial city-state continued in the Eastern Byzantine Empire and later in the Holy Roman Empire. This led to crusades and to new methods of wealth extraction (e.g., indulgences) until eventually splintering in the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation resulted in multiple competing church-state alliances that led to a flurry of devastating religious wars across Europe. Known as the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), it effectively ended the long era of religion as the primary method of coercing the masses.

III. **The Story of “Progress” (Act 2): Reason & European Nation-State Empires (1648-1945)**

- a. **Description:** The nation-state includes all the elements of the city-state listed above (II.a), but connects the polity of the state with the cultural identity of a nation. It is defined by its borders; restricts who can be a citizen, controls imports and exports, determines the language, etc. Rather than loyalty based on religion, the nation-state encourages nationalism. Wars will now be a competition among nations, rather than among religions.
- b. **The Story:** The innovators of this age claim that the true source of power is *reason*. Beginning with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 that ended the ruinous Thirty Years War, European people begin to shift from religious superstition toward enlightenment. The guiding ideology is Descartes’ dualism: the individual knowing (male) mind is a subject endowed with Spirit, while the body, community and the earth are objects devoid of Spirit. The supremacy of the rational mind allows for “objective” scientific analysis and experimentation, and results in a scouring of the globe for resources and labor—from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to the Berlin Conference in which European nations carve up Africa into colonies. “Mind over matter” means the “cultivated” European mind over the mindless bodies and resources of the earth. This racist, materialist ideology is the foundation for the Industrial Revolution & capitalism. If all is an object, then objects can be commodified and extracted for energy, bodies commodified for free or cheap labor, and goods commodified for money/capital. In this Social Darwinism, humanity is turned upside down. Barbaric cruelty is considered more evolved/advanced, while cooperative community is considered less evolved/primitive.
- c. **The Economy:** Adam Smith (1776) understood economics to be a *science*, and no longer an art, that advances the national interest. He regrounded economics from management of the national household to a discipline based on universal law. He taught that the nation can increase its wealth best if it moves away from feudalism (land as the source of wealth) to refounding the economy on the division & specialization of labor. John Stuart Mill (mid 1800s) sought to uncover the *laws* of human nature and apply them to economics. He concluded that people are primarily motivated by the desire to possess wealth and by their love of luxury. He assumed people are fundamentally individualistic, self-interested, competitive and calculating. Economic theory increasingly became a science unto itself, separated from the earth and the common good. At this time, economics is not yet driving the dominant narrative, but developing a new “scientific” authority as a stand-alone discipline.

- d. **Resistance/Alternatives:** Industrialization and capitalism create unprecedented wealth for the capitalist ruling class, but miserable conditions for slaves, indentured servants, and lower class factory workers. There are numerous slave rebellions and anti-colonial movements in Asia, Africa and the Americas. Revolution and protests break out across Europe in 1848, with many reacting to the miserable and exploitative conditions of industrial factory work in the cities. Alternative communities sprout up in the 19th century across the US (e.g., Shakers, Oneida Community, New Harmony) as a reaction to a growing sense of alienation. Socialism emerges as a viable political & economic alternative in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and by the early 1910s socialism becomes a serious political force across the world, including in the US.
- e. **Ideological Collapse:** The European capitalist nation-state brought an end to religious wars, but created a new tension – fast growing industrial economies and a scramble for land & resources across the world. The advent of reason, science, and technology were “proof” of European supremacy and progress, which justified colonization. This culminated in an arms race, with European nations forming mutual defense alliances. The result was World War I, which was primarily about boundaries, colonies, and spheres of influence, and its continuation in World War II. Germany and England, centers of the Enlightenment, the academy, high culture, and industrialization, were bitter enemies and the opposing centers of these wars that devastated Europe. They drew the entire globe into their warfare due to the reach of colonization. Furthermore, nationalism led to right-wing fascism in Italy, Germany and Spain. Germany, perhaps the *most* “rational” country and the very center of Western civilization, succumbed to Hitler and the Holocaust. Enlightenment reason and illusions of progress were shattered in Europe, only to continue in a new form in the United States of America.

The March of “Civilization”

<i>Polity:</i>	Tribe/Clan	City-State	Nation-State	Corporate-State
<i>Economy:</i>	Gift	Monetary	Mercantilist	Neoliberal
<i>Ideology:</i>	Spirit	Religion	Reason	Economics
<i>Anthropology:</i>	Kinship	Subject	Citizen	Consumer

The Myth of Progress Timeline (1 of 5)

May 3, 2017

8,500 BCE	Agricultural revolution: domestication of plants & animals
3,000	City-states emerge in Mesopotamia and Egypt (the north and south end of the Fertile Crescent). First writing, division into social classes, hierarchies & patriarchy, temples.
1,250-1,000	Exodus: Groups of Canaanites defect from Egyptian city-states to the highlands of Palestine. They form early Israel, covenanting with YHWH & one another to live according to ancient values.
431-404	Peloponnesian War: Athens loses the war and Sparta becomes the leading power in Greece.
428-348	Plato: Founder of the Academy in Athens and the father of Western Philosophy. Writes during & in the wake of the devastation of war. Legacy of dualism, which is dissociation out of trauma.
27BCE-395 CE	Roman Empire: Ruled by emperors with an imperial theology that highlighted their divinity. <i>Pax Romana</i> justified conquest. Surrounded the Mediterranean Sea. Included most of what is Western Europe today. One of the largest empires in world history. Continues to shape the religion, politics, economics, law, and overall imagination of the West.
4 BCE-30 CE	Jesus of Nazareth: Galilean prophet, teacher, and organizer who calls the people back to the ancient ways. Executed by Roman Empire. Founding figure of Christianity.
5-66	Apostle Paul: Pharisee who converts to the radical way of Jesus rather than way of empire.
3 rd c. on	Desert Fathers: early Christian hermits, ascetics, and monks who retreat from increasingly imperial Christian centers (Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem, etc.) and live in the wilderness
330-1453	Eastern Byzantine Empire: the continuation of Roman Empire, but with capital in Constantinople (founded by Emperor Constantine)
962-1806	Holy Roman Empire: ends with Napoleon's conquests across Europe
1095-1291	Crusades: surplus warriors from Europe are sent by the Pope on fools' errands to reconquer the Holy Land (Israel, etc.), entrenches "crusading impulse" that has ramifications in the Inquisition and the conquest of the Western Hemisphere
1346-1353	Black Plague: 1/3 of European population dead by disease
1453	Fall of Constantinople: crusaders from Italy besiege Eastern Roman capital, leaving it vulnerable to future attacks by Ottoman (Muslim) invaders
1492-1502	Columbus & European Colonization: using naval and military technology perfected during the Crusades, Columbus
1517-1648	Protestant Reformation: political-religious alliance of European petty monarchs and intellectuals who rebel against the Catholic Church in Rome; some for freedom of conscience and religious practice, some for their own ambitions
1618-1648	Thirty Years War & Treaty of Westphalia: Europe devolves into complete violence and chaos
1637	Rene Descartes: publishes <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> , "I think, therefore I am." Traumatic response to 30 Years War, dissociation from real world, escape into the mind, where it's safe.
1651	Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan: Writing in the aftermath of the 30 Years War, "the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." It would be better for members of society to enter into a social contract with each other and submit their liberties to the State (or an absolute dictator).
15 th -19 th c.	Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: the basis of most profit in the agricultural economies of Europe and the US = free/stolen labor from Africa
1776	Adam Smith & Capitalism: publishes <i>Wealth of Nations</i> , the "invisible hand" of self-interest in a free market will lead to an overall prosperous society
1760-1840	Industrial Revolution: creation of machines that will more efficiently do what only humans and animals could do before, as long as resources like water and fossil fuels like coal are available
1859	Charles Darwin & Evolution: publishes <i>On the Origin of Species</i>
1884	Berlin Conference – Colonization of Africa: European empires divide Africa into territories
1880s-1920s	Scientific Management of Workers ("Taylorism"): how to increase productivity and efficiency by treating humans like machines
1914-1918	World War I: the tinderbox of mutual defense alliances in Europe finally explodes; unveiling of devastating military technology: poison gas, machine guns, airplanes, tanks, flamethrowers
1929-1939	Great Depression: begins with stock market crash, ends with WWII
1939-1945	World War II: The Soviet Union and USA are the last men standing after total war

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Overview

<u>Polity</u>	Tribe/Clan	City-State	Nation-State	Corporate-State
<u>Economy</u>	Gift	Management	Mercantilism	Neoliberalism
<u>Ideology</u>	Spirit	Religion	Reason	Economics
<u>Anthropology</u>	Kinship	Subject	Citizen	Consumer

The Ancient Story: Kinship Based Societies

Description



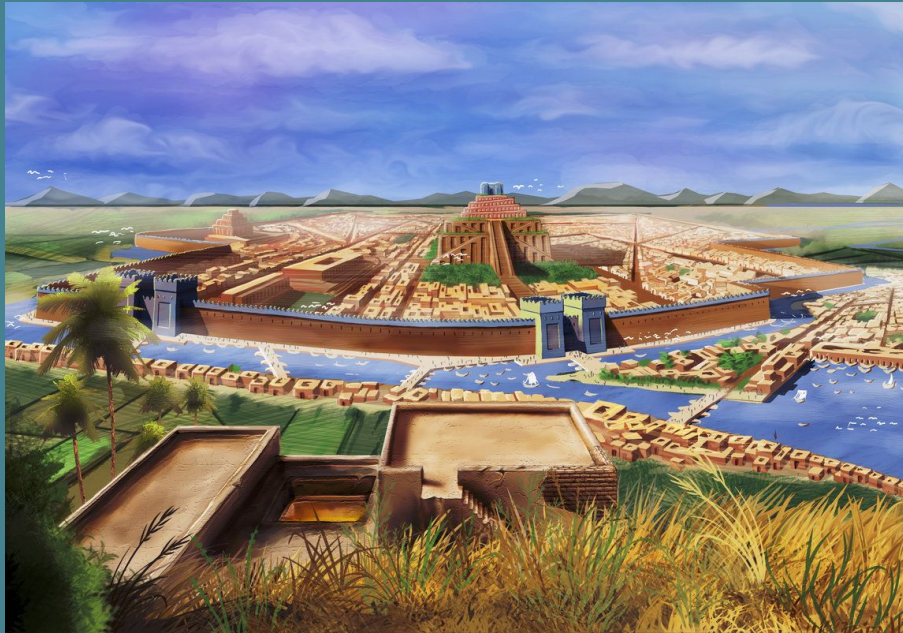
- Semi-nomadic
- Hunting & gathering
- Regenerative subsistence farming
- Symbiotic relationship with nature
- Gift economy (not based on money)
- Oral tradition
- Matriarchal
- Organized in tribes, clans & bands

The Story



The Story of “Progress” (Act 1): Religion & Western City-State Empires 3000 BCE - 1648 CE

Description



- Intensive agriculture
- Concentrated settlements
- Irrigation projects
- Storage of surplus crops
- Population growth
- Patriarchal & hierarchical
- Division of labor
- Class based society
- Writing develops for record keeping
- Money economy (transactional)
- Armies
- Slavery
- Centralization
- Walled cities
- Palaces & temples

The Story



God

Angels

King

Aristocracy

Free male citizens

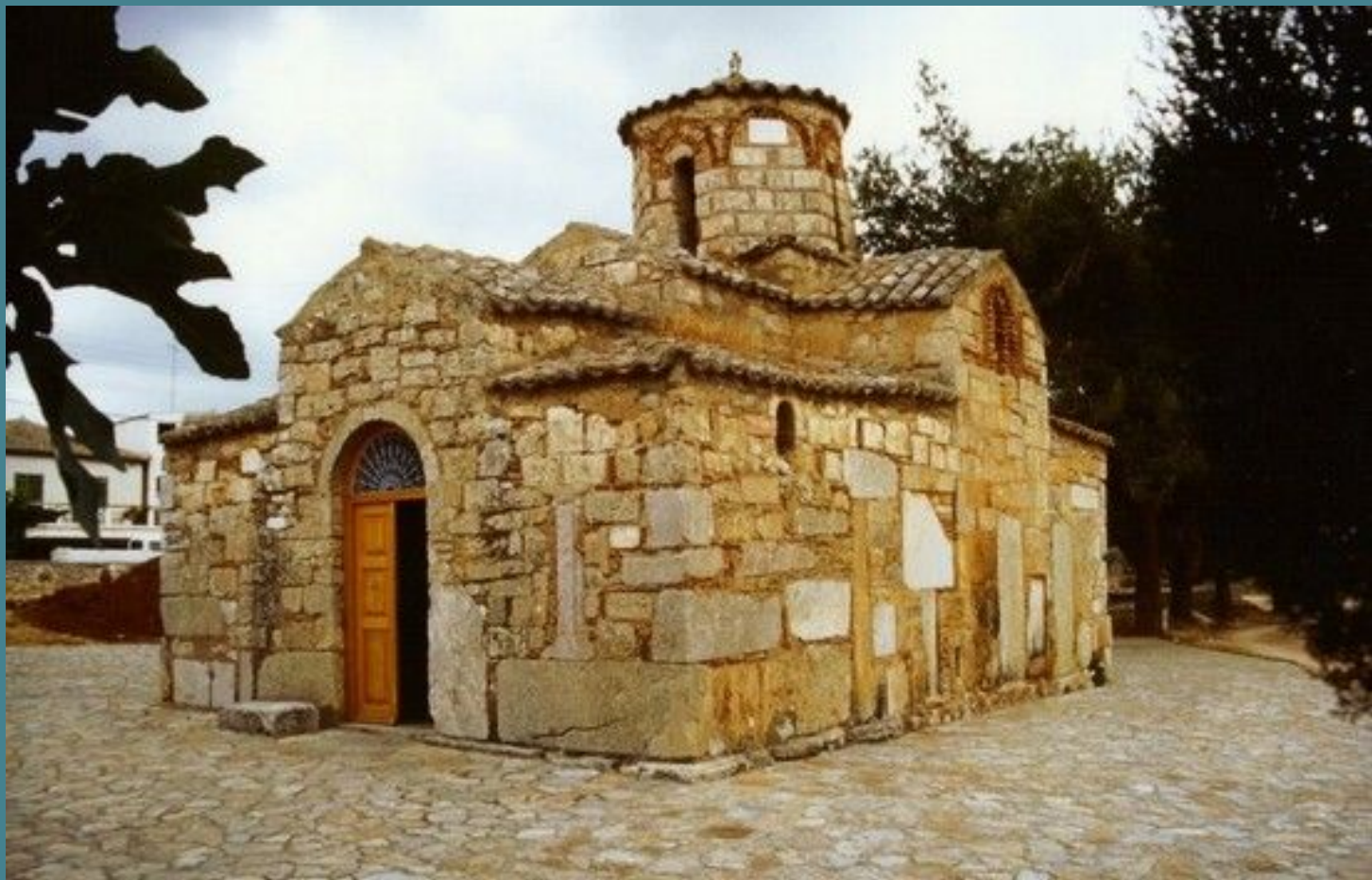
Women, slaves & children

Pagans

Plants & animals

Rocks, dirt & minerals

The Economy



Resistance & Alternatives



Collapse



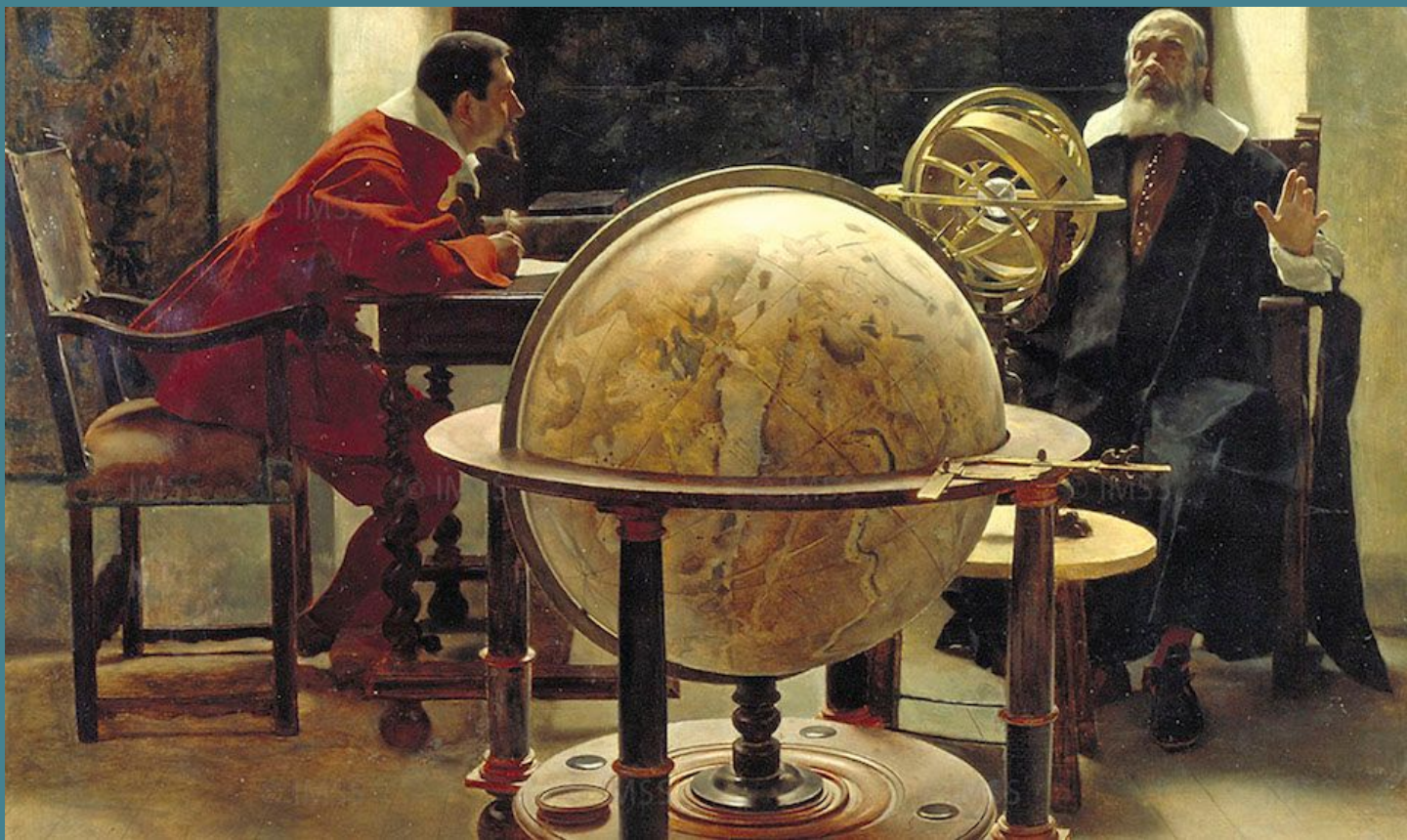
The Story of “Progress” (Act 2): Reason & European Nation-State Empires 1648 - 1945 CE

Description



- Everything from previous city-state list
- Cultural affinity is to nation
- Defined by its borders
- Restrictions about who can be a citizen
- Controls on crossing borders
- Controls on imports and exports
- Competing nationalisms
- Colonialism

The Story



The Economy



Resistance



Collapse



Review

<u>Polity</u>	Tribe/Clan	City-State	Nation-State	Corporate-State
<u>Economy</u>	Gift	Management	Mercantilism	Neoliberalism
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“American Progress”

John Gast, 1872

