

Human Exceptionalism: The assumption that humans are separate from and superior to the non-human beings who share with us planet Earth. While humans are actually a subset of animals, and all beings on Earth are deeply interconnected, we are taught to view this relationship as a hierarchy. In fact, this human/animal hierarchy is the foundational hierarchy upon which other oppressions are built. It becomes much easier to harm humans—for instance, Black and Indigenous people—by calling them “animals” when it is already legitimate to harm animals.

American Exceptionalism: The assumption that the United States is inherently different from and superior to other nations, especially virtuous, and that American values, political system, and history are unique and worthy of universal admiration. It presumes that the US is both destined and entitled to play a special role on the world stage, just as it was “Manifest Destiny” for the U.S. to expand through Indigenous nations to conquer the continent “from sea to shining sea.”

American Exceptionalism is built on Human Exceptionalism because it centrally involved the “taming of the frontier” and the transformation of Indigenous land into “real estate” that could be owned. When the genocide of Indigenous peoples is acknowledged, it is generally framed as an “unfortunate” outcome, rather than an intentional policy throughout U.S. history to eliminate Indigenous nations in order to take over their land and resources (still ongoing).

White Exceptionalism: The assumption that white people are the founders and carriers of civilization and that they are a Chosen People or superior race destined to rule the world. American Exceptionalism is a form of White Exceptionalism. The U.S. origin myth portrays an epic struggle between white civilization and the supposed “barbarism” of indigenous peoples. The “taming of the frontier” represented the victory of “civilization” over “savagery.”

Western Exceptionalism: Related to this is Western Exceptionalism, the belief that predominately white nations are the most “advanced” nations and represent the heights of human “progress” and achievement. This presumes, of course, that non-western nations, labelled “underdeveloped” or “third world,” are “backwards,” in need of western help (the “white savior” and the “white man’s burden”). Westerners are taught that the suffering in non-western nations is either a result of racial/cultural inferiority or is an “unfortunate tragedy,” rather than the result of centuries of looting and plundering of their natural and human resources by wealthy western nations and corporations (how western nations/corporations gained their wealth and power, including the United States).

There is a special form of Western Exceptionalism that is rooted in LGBTQ issues. It is called “**pink washing**” and it refers to western nations holding themselves up as superior specifically with regards to LGBT rights and using this as a justification to promote Islamophobia and engage in political aggression and economic sanctions against non-western nations.

Unexamined assumptions:

Assuming that the U.S. is the most progressive country with regards to LGBTIQ+ issues. The US is less progressive than often imagined and other countries are more progressive than often imagined. For instance, many people are surprised to learn that South Africa was the first country in the world to include sexual orientation as a protected category in its Constitution.

Assuming that white communities are more progressive around LGBTIQ+ issues than communities of color

Assuming that the U.S. trajectory with regards to LGBTIQ+ rights is the appropriate one to follow. What has developed within the U.S. (advocating for legal rights to marriage, inheritance etc) has largely reflected the needs and desires of white, middle class, cisgender people.

Assuming that contemporary U.S. understandings of gender and sexuality are the “correct” ones (in particular, distinctions between “gay” and “transgender”)

Assuming that U.S. understandings of “identity” are universal—that your sexual behavior makes you into a particular type of person, that your identity should be expressed and proclaimed as part of your individual empowerment

Assuming that LGBTIQ+ people in other countries will have heard of Stonewall, Pride etc. and feel a sense of emotional connection to it

Assuming that you are there to “help” disadvantaged others

Assuming that you are there to “teach” disadvantaged others, or that what you have to bring is inherently superior to what those from a different culture/community have to bring

Assuming that your needs are the most important in the situation and expecting those around you to cater to your needs and wishes. Stereotypes of Americans abroad aren’t necessarily exaggerated.

Assuming that others are “exotic” and fetishizing them, including through sex tourism

Assuming that cultural others are childlike, innocent, “backwards,” or somehow not fully contemporaries

Assuming that cultural others necessarily live in tragic or oppressive conditions--without examining the contributions of the policies of your own country/community to their suffering

Assuming that there is an “LGBT community/movement” that is universal and global. There is a tremendous amount of diversity and disagreement within LGBTIQ+ communities, both within countries, cultures, and regions and between lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, intersex people, and queer people.