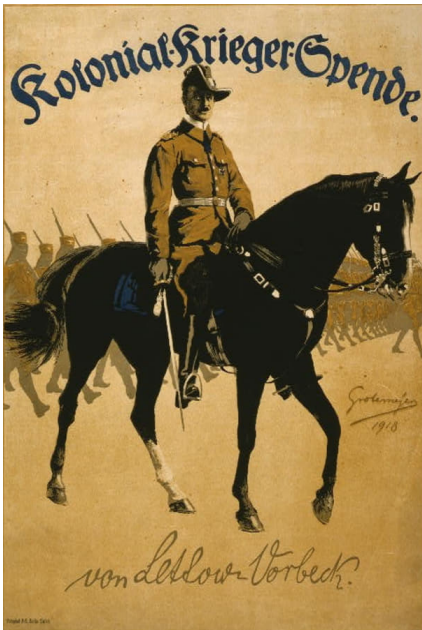


# The Postil Magazine

Uniting Wisdom With The Soul – Vivida Vis Animi



## Colonialism and Bruce Gilley: Electric Kool-Aid Acid of the Moral Imagination

October 1, 2022 Wayne Cristaudo

Full Text at: <https://www.thepostil.com/colonialism-and-bruce-gilley-electric-kool-aid-acid-of-the-moral-imagination/>

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Bruce Gilley is a Professor of Political Science at Portland University—at least he was still there last time I looked, though it seems his existence is an affront to all the other good and virtuous professors who work there and who are doing their damndest to push him into unemployment (the idea that professors could in any way be more virtuous than other people, and hence be tasked with instructing them in how to be better people, is something that, in a world less insane, would be worked into one of the more incredulous episodes of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*).

Bruce Gilley was once a highly respected scholar—with a dizzying number of academic prizes behind him—who once published books with such illustrious academic presses as the University Of California, and Columbia and Cambridge University. He burnt his bridges within the academic world with his essay “The Case for Colonialism.” The paper originally appeared in *Third World Quarterly* in 2017, having passed the blind refereeing process—a process that might give the delusion that the refereeing process in the Humanities and Social Sciences ensures academic quality and integrity—it doesn’t. But in any case those denouncing Gilley only care about referees who agree with them; and in the case of this essay, a petition of “thousands of scholars” and the resignation, in protest, of nearly half the editorial board of the journal, plus death threats being sent to the editor of the journal ensured it being “withdrawn” and given a new home.

Since the denunciations and attacks, Professor Gilley has written two books, both with Regnery Press—one can safely assume a university press will no longer touch anything he writes. His previous book, *The Last Imperialist: Sir Alan Burns’s Epic Defense of the British Empire*, before getting into print, underwent a similar saga. It was first going to be published by Lexington Books (an imprint of Rowman & Littlefield), where Gilley was also going to oversee, as the Series Editor, “Problems of Anti-Colonialism,” which would bring out books that sought “to reignite debate through a critical examination of the anti-colonial, decolonizing, and post-colonial projects.”

Then, the cancel crowd stepped in, started a petition on change.org: “Against Bruce Gilley’s Colonial Apologetics.” Many indignant “scholars” eagerly added their signatures. There was a counter-petition, which got nearly 5000 signatures, to try to save the series. But true-to-form, Rowman & Littlefield buckled and cancelled the series.

Eventually, Gilley found a far better home for his work—Regnery Publishing, which has also published his most recent book, *In Defense of German Colonialism: And How Its Critics Empowered Nazis, Communists, and the Enemies of the West*. This book does an excellent job of showing the ideological idiocy of those who are entrusted with teaching history to the youth of today, and who preside over the institutions which are preservers and now complete fabricators of a historical memory; that is to act as a foundation for future building.

Professor Gilley does not need my help in the shootout with the academy, as he takes down one “scholar” after another for preferring their ideological concoctions to the facts of the matter. But it is worth drawing attention to a few

points that undermine not simply the ideological nonsense or inconvenient facts that derail the academic consensus which Gilley takes on with verve and astuteness, but both the role that the academy has adopted in ostensibly learning from the evils of the past to build a better future, and the mind-set that so commonly succumbs to preferring ideological simplicities and grand sounding nostrums to the far more complicated explorations which yield equivocations and hesitations in judgments about people who have had to deal with vastly different circumstances than those of our professional idea-makers, brokers, and overseers—as well as conclusions which one might not particularly be appreciated for reaching. That is, the study of real history requires being prepared to consider questions that transport one outside of a consensus that has been cemented because it was not driven by facts, historical or otherwise, nor by a well-considered and well-orchestrated series of questions, but by a priori “morally” and politically derived commitments which close off all manner of questions and hence understandings about reality.

...

In any case, the various reasons that were involved in decolonization, including their excessive cost, an increasing lack of support on the home front, and the aspirations of an indigenous elite and rebels calling and /or fighting for national independence, were not events that had anything to do with the academics of today who contemplate colonialism as a moral problem with a very simple answer—it’s really bad.

Our time is not one in which colonialism offers any kind of desideratum at a personal, social or political level. Which is also to say the academic who writes critically about colonialism today is doing about as much to stop colonialism occurring now as their writings have to do with preventing a reconnaissance mission on Venus.

Of those teaching in universities who have fought for wars of independence who are still alive and who might hold a job in a university or in the media, the kind of questions raised by Gilley then come into play, viz. did things fare better once there was “liberation?” The answer to that will depend upon many things—who the colonizers were and what they did, and what transpired afterward.

Having taught in Darwin (Australia), I met a number of people who had fought against the Indonesians to create an independent East Timor/Timor-Leste. The results in Timor-Leste are mixed, though it is very poor; and while there are

issues of corruption, it is stable. For their part, the Indonesians were, to put it mildly, not loved by the locals. The fact that the Indonesians occupied it after they had liberated themselves from the Dutch only goes to show that yesterday's colonized can readily become tomorrow's colonizer.

The question of how a country fares after colonialism is a serious one, and in some places the results have been horrific. It was the existence of such cases, of which there are many, with Cambodia winning the prize in that department, closely followed by a number of African nations like Uganda and Congo, that makes an article, such as Gilley's case for re-colonialism, worth considering. But it is a far better career move to hate on Gilley by people who would rather ignore any facts which might complicate the founding passage of post-colonial scripture that the 'white-colonialist devil' is the demiurge responsible for all the post-colonial violence that occurs, and the formerly colonized are either angels of light and liberation, or zombies created by their white masters.

Gilley's article is short enough for me not to have to repeat its contents. I will simply say that Gilley was trying to make serious recommendations about how recolonizing might be a better option in some places than continuing in the same way. That is the kind of idealism/thinking by design that I genuinely eschew, but as a thought experiment it deserved better than the accolades of denunciation it garnered. And had his critics taken their heads out of the sack of Kool Aid Acid, they might have realized that Gilley does not argue for reconquering territory, but for investment with legal/sovereign strings attached being undertaken in areas desperately in need of economic and social development.

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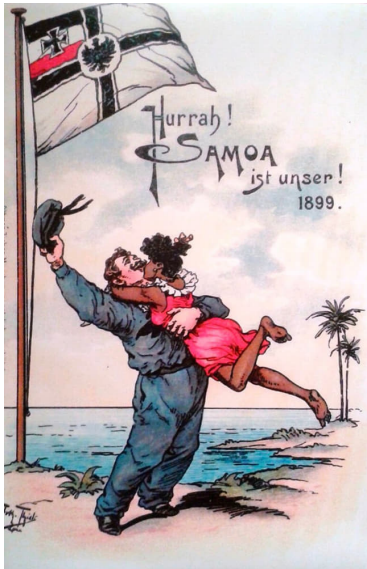
### 3.

Much of what Gilley says in his article has been said by others, his "mistake" was to say it straight and assemble it into a formulation that exposes the thoughtlessness of the modern ideological consensus about colonialism. More broadly, though, the thoughtlessness that Gilley is dealing with is not just about colonialism, it is about how the world has come to be the world that is. Colonialism is certainly one part of that, and it is what concerns Gilley.

But if we take a step back from colonialism (and it is this that also distinguished, as Gilley notes, the "pro-colonialist" Marx from the "anti-colonialist" Lenin), two further considerations about the world are particularly pertinent, if we want to free our minds from the enchainment of stupidity that is presented as some kind

of moral progress which is due to the purity of thought and being of our contemporary pontificating paragons. The first is where violence and war fit generally into the schema of human things. The second is technology (including the division of labour it requires—one of Marx’s better thoughts was to see the interconnection the division of labour, i.e., classes and technology; and like all Marx’s better thought, Marxists have abandoned it), and administrative technique.

...



[German postcard (1899). “Hurrah! Samoa is ours!”]

But let’s get back to reality—colonialism might better induct the colonized into the means and manners required to live with the machinery and technology, and administrative and various systems that are being introduced into this world that cannot escape modernity—to repeat, because if it is not introduced by the colonizers, it will definitely be introduced by those “industrious” enough to get hold of the equipment and weapons that they can put to use. This is where Bruce Gilley raises important arguments, and why the reaction to him only illustrates what a mind dump the academy is, as it disseminates fantasies, moral and not so moral, about the world and its history so that it can enable a technocratic infantile future, as bereft of knowledge and wisdom, as it will be bereft of real love, and creative and cooperative endeavours.

I have already made the points that I wish to emphasise about modern colonialism needing to be interpreted against the constant of human conflict and the tragic choice placed before any premodern people. I do think that life is ever one in which we are born into the sins and transgressions of our fathers; which is to say, I think Greeks and Christians were essentially correct and in agreement about the kinds of limits we confront, and that the modern elite aspires to throw away those limits and does so by substituting fantasies about the past as well as the future to beguile us into their nightmare.

But there can be no doubt that the modern opens up previously undreamt-of technologies and techniques which are amazing, and which enable the possibility of greater comfort and opportunities to do things for those that can get access to

them. Thus, it is inevitably the case that any people who are conquered by a technologically superior people, if not completely turned into slaves, will benefit from the materials now available to them. We might call this the Monty Python/ *Life of Brian* argument for colonialism. To put it briefly: What have European colonizers ever done for the World? Answer: they brought with them the modern techniques and technologies of wealth creation. And the absence of those techniques and technologies is lower life expectancy and, in terms of sheer numbers, less wealth and less social choices.

Of course, in any society not everyone is or was a beneficiary of new social or technological innovations, and in every society the number of poor is significant—and prior to the industrial revolution poverty was far greater, and far more people were far more vulnerable to unfortunate climate conditions. And let us be real, at a time when there is so much panic about climate change, the fact is that any future famine, as with a number of past ones, will be far more likely due to political conditions than climate alone. At a time when the Malthusians run amok and aspire to dictate how the world should be depopulated, there is less global poverty and food shortage than ever; and where it does occur, politics and corruption rather than climate or population are the primary causes.

#### 4.

The points I have made above are general, but if I were to recommend one book that any reader wanting to consider a test case, which refutes so much of the moralising that is done about colonialism should read it would be Gilley's *In Defense of German Colonialism: And How Its Critics Empowered Nazis, Communists, and the Enemies of the West*. The *Postil* has already published [a short extract](#) from it; but that extract did not indicate the extent to which Gilley exposes and successfully critiques the thoughtless claims that academics have made about German colonialism—or, in his (un-minced) words, “the drivel that passes for academic history” about German colonial history.

Early in the work, Gilley makes three points about colonialism in general, which are worth repeating and the antithesis of the kinds of facts that get in the way of a good moral fantasy. I will quote them:

*“Islands offer an almost perfect natural experiment in colonialism’s economic effects because their discovery by Europeans was sufficiently random. As a result, they should not have been affected by the ‘pull’ factors that made some places easier to colonize than others. In a 2009 study of the effects of colonialism on the*

*income levels of people on eighty-one islands, two Dartmouth College economists found 'a robust positive relationship between colonial tenure and modern outcomes.' Bermuda and Guam are better off than Papua New Guinea and Fiji because they were colonized for longer. That helps explain why the biggest countries with limited or no formal colonial periods (especially China, Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran, Thailand, and Nepal) or whose colonial experiences ended before the modern colonial era (Brazil, Mexico, Guatemala, and Haiti) are hardly compelling as evidence that not being colonized was a boon."*

And,

*"Colonialism also enhanced later political freedoms. To be colonized in the nineteenth–twentieth-century era was to have much better prospects for democratic government, according to a statistical study of 143 colonial episodes by the Swedish economist Ola Olsson in 2009."*

And,

*"These twin legacies of economic development and political liberalism brought with them a host of social and cultural benefits—improved public health, the formation of education systems, the articulation and documentation of cultural diversity, the rights of women and minorities, and much else. It is no wonder, then, that colonized peoples by and large supported colonial rule. They migrated closer to more intensive areas of colonialism, paid taxes and reported crimes to colonial authorities, fought for colonial armies, administered colonial policies, and celebrated their status as colonial subjects. Without the willing collaboration of large parts of the population, colonialism would have been impossible."*

With respect to the motives and the legacy of German colonialism, Gilley makes the argument that it was not primarily a plundering undertaking, in which blacks were to be treated as sub-humans and whites could treat them however they wanted—Gilley provides a number of examples of whites behaving badly in the German colonies and being punished for doing so. To frame it thus is not only to replace fact with fantasy but it is to ignore not only the statements of the colonizers themselves, but more important the voices of the colonized—Gilley provides numerous citations—who found that German colonial rule had brought greater peace and prosperity to them, thanks to placating tribal rivalries and long held animosities (Chapter 3 provides an analysis of the Herero and Nama

peoples, and the imaginative claims that Herero-Nama wars were created by the Germans, or even more fantastically that they were gestures of anti-colonialism!). The major motivation, argues Gilley, is that colonialism was perceived as the accompanying condition of nation-building and being taken seriously as a major European power. The point is an interesting and important one, and it illustrates the vast gulf that separates the mindset of the generation that now dominates in the universities from that of a previous generation caught up in a completely different set of priorities of world-making.

Gilley provides numerous examples of what the German colonialists built, and again I will cite a few of his cases.

*“Having first established peace in East Africa, the Germans proceeded to establish prosperity. A 1,250-kilometer railway was built linking Lake Tanganyika to Dar es Salaam. To this day, the railway remains the lifeblood of Tanzania’s economy and of Zambia’s trans-shipment traffic. The German colonial railway was not just economically beneficial. It also led to the documenting of the region’s geography, vegetation, minerals, and peoples—much of which was carried out by the German-English railway engineer Clement Gillman as he surveyed the new line.”*

And,

*“For the green conscious, it is especially noteworthy that German colonialism discovered the knowledge and crafted the regulations that protected the great forests and fauna of today’s Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi.”*

And,

*“Without doubt, Germany’s greatest humanitarian contribution to Africa during its colonial period was the discovery of a cure for sleeping sickness. In terms of lives saved, Germany’s colonial achievement could stand on this ground alone. Sleeping sickness originated in nomadic cattle-herding populations in Africa whose movements had spread the disease for hundreds of years before the colonial era. The increase in intensive farming under colonialism accelerated its spread, an inevitable result of policies to increase food supply and modernize agriculture. The disease was ravenous. The British calculated that an outbreak in 1901–07 killed between two hundred thousand and three hundred thousand people in British Uganda, and two million people succumbed in all of East Africa in 1903 alone.”*

Nineteenth century colonialism is, as Gilley rightly notes, part of a genuinely civilizing approach to world-making. While that approach had both liberal and



traditional European (conservative) accompaniments, it was also to be found in the communists Marx and Engels; and while the German socialists opposed how colonialism was being administered, they were, again as noted by Gilley, not unsupportive of colonial rule.

While the success of the modern, as these examples indicate, can be seen in terms of technical and technological advances, its diabolical underside is disclosed by the ideological concoctions that were to be transposed globally with far more devastating effects than colonialism itself. And if the first part of Gilley's book might be an eyeopener for those who have not wanted to seriously think about what benefits accompanied colonialism, which is to say, those who have not thought out of the now fashionable moral academic box, the second part of the book makes the important point that both the Nazi and the communist projects were able to fuel anti-colonialist sentiments among various members of the aspirant elites in colonized country for their own geopolitical benefit and to the greater detriment of the societies in which these ideologically "educated" elites took power.

Need I say that any elite members wishing to gain power through national independence had no need to worry about the boring give-and-take and talk-fest that is endemic to democracies. Far easier to push through one's will and that of one's loyal support group or tribe and end up with—bloody chaos.

In an age where the holocaust is the diabolical terminus of history and anything and anyone from St. John to Luther to the family has been held up by some scholar or philosopher to be responsible, it is not surprising that colonialism would also be held responsible for the holocaust. But in spite of it now being commonplace among German academics to claim that there is line of continuity between German colonialism and the Nazis, the Nazis themselves from Hitler down wanted no truck with the colonialists and, in the main, few of the colonialists wanted what the Nazis wanted. In case anyone had not noticed, the Nazis were not in the civilizing business. Their fusion of nationalism and socialism, along with their antisemitism, and cult of the leader, was also embraced, along with open admiration for Hitler himself, by numerous anti-colonial leaders, most famously Nehru, Nasser, Amin and the Palestinian cleric Amin al-Husseini.

In the main, while academics don't like the Nazis (unless they are Ukrainian ones who kill Russians and draw up hit lists of people to be liquidated for speaking out against them), they generally do like communists – in their upside-down world,

communist rebels are freedom fighters. That communism is a Western ideological import that has not only exacerbated group and class conflicts but has been the means for justifying and entrenching “third world” elites with no idea how to better enhance economic conditions of people other than seizing land and property and pointing guns at people who must do what they are told.

The story of former colonies becoming entangled in the cross-fire of the Cold War like that of ambitious elites who used independence to secure their own power and wealth, along with those groups who give them their allegiances, is a horror story that belongs to the post-colonial age; but it is not the kind of story that neatly folds into a curricula or mind-set, where the answers to the cause of all things bad are white supremacism, i.e., European colonialists.

In a world as complicated as ours, the failure of the West to have an educated elite that are incapable of understanding the world before it, and the past behind it, is devastating. We are now living in that devastation; and although I detest those whose moral imaginations have been formed by sticking their heads in the bucket of Electric-Kool Aid Acid that now passes for an education, I have to concede that previous better-educated generations failed to see the consequences of their actions, and we are now living within those consequences.

*Post script. Readers of a certain age will probably have recognised that I have borrowed the phrase “The Electric Kool-Aid” from Tom Wolfe’s The Electric Kool-Aid Test, a book about Timothy Leary and his Merry Pranksters bussing across the US and their other shenanagins. This was in the days before college kids demanded safe spaces and fentanyl had become the drug of social breakdown. Wolfe was one of the founders of what was hailed as the new journalism in the early 1970s. Our world looks like the morning after what may have started as a party of sex and drugs and rock n roll and has turned into a nightmare of loneliness and totalitarianism.*

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*Featured: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, the “Lion of Africa,” a poster by Grottemeyer, dated 1918. The caption reads: “Kolonial-Krieger-Spende,” or “Colonial Soldiers Fund.” Signature of von Lettow-Vorbeck at the bottom.*