

## **Busting Up the Intellectual Racket of Anti-Colonialism**

*The following is Professor Gilley's response to media inquiries to the "Open Letter" below from 58 scholars at Oxford University in response to Professor Nigel Biggar's essay "Don't Feel Guilty About Our Colonial History":*

"The haughty response of the various Oxford tutors and graduate students to Professor Biggar shows just how little debate there has been on colonialism over the last half century. These insular academics have been talking to one another for so long that they are startled that not everyone shares their views. They set up a number of ridiculous critiques of Professor Biggar which show how unable they are to grapple with difficult questions of public policy. For instance, they say that comparing the ravages of Robert Mugabe to the potential alternatives of British colonialism or the ethnic consociationalism under Ian Smith 'is not a meaningful comparison' without explaining why. Feasible alternatives and their relative costs and benefits are precisely the meaningful comparisons. Are they seriously arguing, to take another example, that the 379 killed by an irritable British colonel at Amritsar (who was punished and sacked for his behavior unlike the murderous Hindu nationalists who have killed that many every month or so since then) outweighed the British-led elimination of slave trading? Finally, invoking the racial chauvinist Aimé Césaire to pooh-pooh the public order brought by colonialism is ironic since his native Martinique has for 70 years preferred to remain an overseas department of France rather than become fully independent. The decolonizing 'Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais' is a flop. Intellectuals, whether poets or dons, do not always represent common sense. The petulant and entitled tone of the letter by the gowns shows how mortified they are by the prospect that the anti-colonial intellectual racket that they have been running for half a century is finally being busted up. Thank goodness we still have a free society that allows these bubbles to be burst." – 21 December 2017

Ethics and empire: an open letter from Oxford scholars

December 19, 2017

We are scholars who work on histories of empire and colonialism and their after-effects, broadly understood. We teach our students to think seriously and critically about those histories and their contemporary legacies. We write to express our opposition to the public stance recently taken on these questions by Nigel Biggar, also an academic at Oxford, and the agenda pursued in his recently announced project entitled "Ethics and Empire".

Professor Biggar has every right to hold and to express whatever views he chooses or finds compelling, and to conduct whatever research he chooses in the way he feels appropriate. But his views on this question, which have been widely publicised at the Oxford Union, as well as in national newspapers, risk being misconstrued as representative of Oxford scholarship. For many of us, and more importantly for our students, they also reinforce a pervasive sense that contemporary inequalities in access to and experience at our university are underpinned by a complacent, even celebratory, attitude towards its imperial past. We therefore feel obliged to express our firm rejection of them.

Biggar's media interventions have been spurred in defence of a discredited polemical opinion piece by American political scientist Bruce Gilley. This advocated a "recolonisation" of parts of the world by Western powers as a solution to misgovernment in the global south. His own call for British "pride to

temper shame” in the assessment of empire is similarly intended to fortify support for overseas military interventions today. Such prescriptions not only rest on very bad history, they are breathtakingly politically naive.

We do believe that historical scholarship should inform public debate and contemporary politics. But it cannot do so through simple-minded equations between “pride” and swaggering global confidence, or between “shame” and meek withdrawal.

Nor can it pretend to offer serious history when it proposes such arguments as that the British empire’s abolition of the slave trade stands simply as a positive entry in a balance-book against (for example) the Amritsar massacre or the Tasmanian genocide. Abolition does not somehow erase the British empire’s own practice of slavery and the benefits it continued to reap from the slave trade long after it ended – such as railway investments in the UK or cotton imports from the US South. Nor can historians accept the simple claim that imperialism “brought order” without examining what that actually meant for those subject to it. Aimé Césaire’s morally powerful *Discours sur le colonialisme* dispatched such absurd “balance-sheet” arguments as long ago as 1950. It’s disappointing, to say the least, that they should be resurrected for a history of ethics in 2017.

To state his argument for this history, Biggar sets up a caricature in place of an antagonist: an allegedly prevailing orthodoxy that “imperialism is wicked”. His project’s declared aim is to uncover a more complex reality, whose “positive aspects” dispassionate scholarship can reveal. This is nonsense. No historian (or, as far as we know, any cultural critic or postcolonial theorist) argues simply that imperialism was “wicked”.

Good and evil may be meaningful terms of analysis for theologians. They are useless to historians. Nor are historians much moved by arguments that because Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe was a despot, British imperialism or white supremacy under UDI in Rhodesia must surely look better in comparison. That is not a meaningful comparison. Biggar’s argument fails even its own test in the case of Iraq, where in the aftermath of invasion, occupation, civil war and the terror of Daesh that came in their wake, there is no lack of nostalgia for the “order” and “security” of Saddam Hussein.

The “Ethics and Empire” project asks the wrong questions, using the wrong terms, and for the wrong purposes. However seriously intended, far from offering greater nuance and complexity, Biggar’s approach is too polemical and simplistic to be taken seriously. There is doubtless much to be said about the ethical regimes that have historically been used to justify or critique imperial rule (a story at least as old as Tacitus). But there is no sense in which neutral “historical data”, from any historical context, can simply be used to “measure” the ethical appropriateness of either critiques of or apologia for empire, let alone sustain an “ethic of empire” for today’s world.

Neither we, nor Oxford’s students in modern history will be engaging with the “Ethics and Empire” programme, since it consists of closed, invitation-only seminars. Instead, we want students and the wider public to know that the ideas and aims of that project are not those of most scholars working on these subjects in Oxford, whether in the history faculty or elsewhere. We welcome continued, open, critical engagement in the ongoing reassessment of the histories of empire and their legacies both in Britain and elsewhere in the world. We have never believed it is sufficient to dismiss imperialism as simply “wicked”. Nor do we believe it can or should be rehabilitated because some of it was “good”.

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