

# How the hate mob tried to silence me

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***Bruce Gilley: Target of a vicious and ignorant campaign***

In 2012, I bought a copy of the late Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's last published book *There Was A Country*, a memoir of the inter-ethnic Biafra War that killed between one and two million people in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970. I recall the moment, standing at the bookseller's table, when my eyes grew four sizes reading what Achebe had written:

*Here is a piece of heresy. The British governed their colony of Nigeria with considerable care. There was a very highly competent cadre of government officials imbued with a high level of knowledge of how to run a country. This was not something that the British achieved only in Nigeria; they were able to manage this on a bigger scale in India and Australia. The British had the experience of governing and doing it competently. I am not justifying colonialism. But it is important to face the fact that British colonies were, more or less, expertly run.*

I was bowled over. As I read further, Achebe kept coming back to the British period with fonder memories and greater praise. His "articulation of the unsayable", as a Malawian scholar put it, was astounding coming from a man with totemic status in anti-colonial ideology. I went back and read everything he had written and said about colonialism. It turns out he had been saying positive things from the start, as well as negative things. When I published "Chinua Achebe on the Positive Legacies of Colonialism" in *African Affairs* (the top peer-reviewed academic journal in the field) in 2016, I braced for a storm. There were a few critics. But mostly, I received thanks, especially from African intellectuals who were well aware of this great teacher's complex views.

In the process of writing the Achebe article, I stumbled upon Sir Alan Burns. He was one of the last governors of the Gold Coast (later renamed Ghana). Then for ten years, until 1956, Burns was a member of the British delegation to the United Nations, dealing mainly with colonial issues. His pugnacious defense of the colonial endeavour at the UN and in many writings (especially his 1957 *In Defence of Colonies*) made him a made-in-heaven object of the anti-colonial scorn that captured

the world's intellectual imagination for the subsequent half-century. Dinosaur. Reactionary. And, of course, Racist.

As I dug deeper into Sir Alan's life, I found a well-liked and intelligent person who has been forgotten. I tracked down his family, a delightful bunch, scattered around the world. With their help, writing his biography became my major preoccupation. As I finished the research and prepared to write, I wanted to reformulate his thinking in a schematic way. We all want human dignity and flourishing. Why has a system that, by and large, provided more of this to subject peoples than they would otherwise have enjoyed (especially for women and non-dominant groups), and, importantly, was largely accepted as a result, been so roundly denounced? Why is the question of colonialism no longer a social scientific one and instead a doctrine to be hammered into the heads of undergraduates?



**Sir Alan Burns: Defended colonial rule at the UN (PRIVATE COLLECTION)**

"The Case for Colonialism" was my answer. I approached the question in three ways. The "colonialism as history" section is mainly methodological: how do we set up a research design that is not juiced with anti-colonial (or pro-colonial) bias? The "colonialism as present" section was mainly a recounting of Guinea-Bissau and its astounding human tragedy after a Soviet-armed war against Portuguese rule. The "colonialism as future" section was about applying evidence-based lessons learned. Can we reclaim what Achebe called the "great human story" of colonialism's benefits while avoiding its pitfalls? If so, how?

Perhaps a more nuanced title would have been politic. Yet I was reminded of the narrator in V.S. Naipaul's 1967 novel *The Mimic Men* who leads anti-colonial mobs to destroy a humane British colony in the Caribbean: "We wondered why no one had called our bluff. We felt our success to be fraudulent." It needed a straightforward title because I wanted to call the bluff: anti-colonial ideology is often logically incoherent and empirically false.

In retrospect, I should have been more careful to distinguish between early and late colonialism, and to highlight the many inexcusable atrocities that occurred under European rule, inexcusable not just in the normal sense but also in the Burkean sense of an extra duty of care, a "sacred trust", that comes with alien rule. And frankly, I overstated the evidentiary basis for the legitimacy of colonial regimes: the fact is, we simply don't have sufficient data to know for sure.

I first submitted the essay to a well-known UK-based political science journal owned by a big

European publisher. The editor was enthusiastic and asked me to bulk up the literature review before he sent it for peer review. "I really think it is a very powerful piece," he wrote to me. When the reviews came back, one was mostly positive and one was mostly negative, but both were stamped "Reject". As the editor later told me, he had argued for the piece to be published alongside critical responses. The question had gone to the journal's editorial board. They (correctly as it turned out) anticipated a fury and decided it was not worth the grief. As the editor later wrote to me: "I am sorry our reviewers and editorial board decided to play it safe, but I also understand their position (fear of political backlash)."

My next stop was the London-based *Third World Quarterly* (TWQ), where I had previously published two peer-reviewed articles. The journal had been founded in 1979 to be "an open-minded and sympathetic search for establishing an international order based on justice" and "a forum for informed and reasoned debate." It had tilted far left for most of the time since, but its gentle Pakistani-born editor since 1990, Shahid Qadir, had remained adventurous. Too much for his own good as it turned out. The article went through the normal peer review process. As before, the two reviews were split, one positive and one negative. As before, the editor wanted to publish it. Unlike the first editor, Qadir did not run it through a political litmus test first. When the article appeared online, the fury was immediate and intense.

I was sitting in a coffee-shop with a recent Afghani refugee that my family is helping to resettle in Portland, preparing to take him to a job interview, when I received a "high priority" email from an Australian colleague: "You are lighting up my Facebook page with hate mail. Well done mate!" Abdul, the father, saw my concern and gave me a questioning look. My reply was automatic: "Just like the fanatics you escaped from, Abdul!"

First, let me be clear that the article has generated a kind outpouring of support for my position on substantive grounds. That is, many scholars and friends have spoken out in favour of the proposition that a substantive body of empirical work generated over the last half-century has validated the claim that colonialism's benefits usually exceeded its harms in most cases. And, just as important, it was supported more than opposed by host peoples. I have made many new friends in India, Africa, south-east Asia, and the Middle East, and we are now working on several joint projects to summarise colonial contributions to human flourishing. A new friend in Guadeloupe stepped in to prepare a French translation. "The people of the Third World all thank you," a new friend in India wrote.

A second outpouring of support came from those who, while disagreeing to varying degrees with the substantive claims, vigorously defended the importance of the paper being published and debated. The paper quickly appeared on the syllabi of fall courses, often as an object of criticism but clearly filling a need. Graduate students at UC San Diego took it up as a case study of publishing controversial positions. Bloggers took up the questions of counterfactual history that it raises. The paper was read 16,000 times within weeks of appearing, becoming overnight the most widely read paper in TWQ history. As a leading medical researcher in the US of South Asian heritage wrote to me, the suppression of heterodox ideas is "frightening if you think of the structure of scientific revolutions. What does this indicate for new theories, new knowledge, new ideas?"

Still, the hate campaign was Maoist in its ferocity. Words like "utter", "total" and "absolute" filled the soundings. Needless to say, with rare exceptions, critics did not engage the substantive findings of the paper. Who after all would really want to make an argument that Guinea-Bissau was better off without colonialism? Who would seriously argue that Hong Kong and Singapore are not great achievements of colonialism? Did I misquote Achebe? The serious critics wondered why I had not listed all the atrocities committed under colonial rule, of which there are many. It was for the same reason that I did not list all the atrocities committed before and after colonial rule: like it or not, the question facing most peoples was which rulers were less likely to commit atrocities. When they

migrated en masse from non-colonised to colonised areas, they made a prudent choice in favour of regimes likely to commit less, and likely to investigate and punish those that occurred. For instance, after Belgian colonial rule began in the Congo in 1908 to correct the gross abuses of the private fiefdom of King Leopold II, natives streamed into the colonial centres.

Two petitions gathered 16,000 signatures and more were coming in all the time. In part, such virtual flash mobs are becoming part of the discursive landscape of contemporary society. Much of this, I suspect, had nothing to do with me, my article, or even the question of colonialism. Powerful memes are used these days to generate data on users and to direct them to products and services. While my article was not click-bait, the response to it was.

Yet these were not just trolls and bots. They included hundreds of tenured professors at universities in Western countries whose professional and institutional charters insist on the protection of academic freedom and vigorous debate, especially when it comes to challenging orthodoxies. Indeed, these were for the most part the sort of people who spend their time looking everywhere for “hegemony” and insisting on the need for heterodox voices. Yet here they were with *Pravda*-like ferocity insisting on the completeness of their hegemony and the need to punish dissenting voices.

Noam Chomsky stepped in with a call for rebuttal not retraction. Yet his tolerance was too much for some. For a taste of the fanaticism, consider the following excerpt from an essay entitled “Moral paralysis in American academia” written for the Al-Jazeera website by Hamid Dabashi, the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University:

[Chomsky] has as usual refused to denounce Bruce Gilley, offering his habitual bourgeois hogwash that the professor has the right to say what he said and that he too publishes things that offend people. This, of course, is highbrow gibberish — shifting the issue to the domain of censorship and freedom of speech . . . [Gilley] must be ostracised, publicly shamed and humiliated, and never ever called “a colleague” who should be politely invited for a “civilised debate”. Against that “civilised” gathering of morally compromised scholars, I will proudly form a band of barbarian dissidents.

I encourage anyone concerned with liberal society to read his entire screed: it sends chills down the spine to think that a major US university employs a person with such hostile views about a free society. It is incitement by any other name.

It was that sort of language that made me briefly lose confidence, apologise on my website, and ask the journal to withdraw the article. This was an act of self-censorship. It is what grovelling teachers did in the Cultural Revolution, hurriedly writing obsequious letters of contrition and hoping to survive. Fortunately, *TWQ* publisher Taylor & Francis is party to the UK’s Committee on Publication Ethics that prevents retraction for political reasons. I was grateful when they saved me from self-censoring. As a scholar of China, my teaching of the Cultural Revolution will never be the same. Taking my family out of Portland and over the Cascade Mountains for a holiday in central Oregon, I felt like Captain von Trapp leading his family out of fascist Austria into Switzerland.

My home institution did not acquit itself well. This is not surprising. Whole departments — especially our new “School of Gender, Race, and Nations” — are already branded with a certain ideological stamp. The question for them is not whether but how to attack colonialism and “decolonise” everything they can lay hands on. Yet in recent years, as the bioethicist Alice Dreger has written, this ideological branding has extended to universities as a whole. This creates problems when off-message faculty slip through the hiring and tenure process unnoticed and then go on to publish research with diverse viewpoints. My university’s first response was to quote contract language to the effect that I could not be fired. When I self-censored, they rushed to thank me. It is no small irony that our new president is an exile of the Iranian Revolution saved from being returned by

Jimmy Carter's amnesty for students studying in the US. You'd think he would have spoken up.

Predictably, the critics decided that I was a racist and white supremacist. This has become something of a compliment, as it was a compliment for a moderate liberal to be labelled a "Commie" by a fanatic of the Right during the Cold War. In today's coded language, a white supremacist is someone who believes that what Naipaul called the "universal civilisation currently led by the West" is the cornerstone of global human flourishing. Count me in. Also count in hundreds of public intellectuals in the Third World who have long espoused a closer integration with the West as the best pathway to modernity. The Great Chief of Luanda told the governor of the Belgian Congo in 1959 to resist the "loud-mouthed minorities" who would "again plunge our country into the poverty and misery of the past" with their demands for sudden independence. I guess the Great Chief of Luanda was a white supremacist too.

Most of all, it was the intellectual vacuity of the mobs that surprised, and discouraged. The colonial encounter was huge, epochal, varied and complex. To reduce it to a bumper sticker is worse than wrong, it is dull. Any great intellectual who actually lived through that period — like Achebe — rendered it in varied hues. They understood that it was not a tweet, an act; it was a confluence of world-historical forces that no one could control. The rise of the West; the Stone Age development of much of the Rest; the impossible interactions; the bitterness; the attempt to work together; the enduring rift. To say, as I did, that colonialism was mostly good, in the economic and social sense of the word, is merely to state the obvious. The University of Edinburgh's Neil Thin wrote that anti-colonial ideologues have lost the ability to actually learn from history — "appreciative history" as he calls it — so intent they are on whipping it into submission.

Intellectuals like Achebe always knew that there is a good chance they would not be alive but for the public health and nutrition improvements under colonialism. He was also deeply aware that it was the opportunities for publication, travel, income generation, and even residency in the West that had made their intellectual vocation possible. There was a certain maturity and humanity in their thinking about colonialism. Yet as time has passed, their children had become monomaniacal anti-colonial critics.

For radicals in the Third World, the psychological attractions of anti-colonialism are obvious. It builds group solidarity, offers a story of victimisation and entitlement, and distracts attention from the business at hand. Yet this "protest" identity, as the black St. Lucian economist W. Arthur Lewis called it, has slowly been losing ground to what he called the "creative" identity that views the colonial past as a resource and a proud inheritance. That was the topic of my previous article in the *TWQ*, "The Rise of the Creative Third World." I suspect that much of the vitriol this time was not just the fear of uncorking the bottle of research that shows the many benefits of colonialism. It was the fear that these "loudmouthed minorities" are no longer able to bully their kinsmen into silence on the question of colonialism.

These contradictions are nowhere better illustrated than in the person of Vijay Prashad, a devoted Communist from Bengal and professor of international studies at Trinity College in Connecticut. Prashad was the member of the *TWQ* editorial board who led the revolutionary uprising demanding that the article be airbrushed and all involved punished. "I told the managing editor that if [the journal] does not retract this essay, I will resign from the editorial board," he tweeted on September 11. After charges of censorship arose, he hummed and hawed. The *TWQ*, Prashad tweeted, "was started as an intellectual venue for anti-colonial thought, to build ideas against colonialism". He also said it was "the home . . . of values against this essay". The article could have been published elsewhere or sent to "the gutter". Later: "Our ideas must be debated, but not in terms set by the imperialist mindset. We must set the terms of the debate."

"We must set the terms of the debate." This was Lenin's view of the proper role of the party-run

media. Like Dabashi, Prashad is happy to live in the West and make extensive use of its freedoms and its capitalist resources, all the while working feverishly to replace them with some failed experiment. The American magazine the *Weekly Standard* referred to the attacks on my article as the “thugs’ veto”. The word “thug” comes from the Hindi word “thuggees”, referring to the mobs who terrorised northern India after the collapse of the Mughal dynasty before British rule banned them in 1835 and created a stable framework for a new nation to emerge. India, of course, has been a major source of anti-colonial ideology since independence — its biggest export to the West as the joke goes. But it is the heirs of the money-grubbing lower castes who rather liked colonial rule that now rule the roost in Delhi.

As it so happened, three weeks before my “viewpoint” essay was published in *TWQ*, the journal published a “viewpoint” essay by Prashad arguing that the term “imperialism” needs to be applied to all Western interactions with the Third World. When questions arose about whether my article had passed peer review, the publishers undertook a lengthy investigation and reported that “in line with the journal’s policy” the article was put through double-blind peer review before being published. One would assume, therefore, that the same was true of Prashad’s essay. It was not. My colleagues at the National Association of Scholars chapter in Connecticut confirmed that Prashad’s essay was published without peer review.

Not that this matters substantively. For a journal whose readers and reviewers generally lean far to the Left, it probably would have been a mere formality. It is a wonderful irony that the same critics who reject science, objectivity and empiricism (as Prashad does in his essay) as covers for “the imperial mindset” set such store by it when a heterodox opinion appears, and apparently give it little thought when a beloved comrade weighs in with another stirring denunciation of the West.

In the end, my essay was withdrawn because Indian anti-colonial fanatics made death threats against Qadir. This “suppression of research findings on blatantly political grounds”, wrote the University of Buckingham historian and academic ethics specialist Geoffrey Alderman, suggests “we have indeed stumbled into a very dark place”. This is no understatement. “L’affaire *TWQ*” is about much more than one article. It is not even mainly about the substantive debate on colonialism, which reasonable people can disagree about. Rather, it is about a worrying loss of faith in the liberal and pluralistic norms that made the West. The rot is now so deep that that it extends well beyond the academy and into the virtual social spaces where, like it or not, most people’s political views are formed.

In a strange way, then, “The Case for Colonialism” has unintentionally become a case for the recolonisation of the West by its own liberal traditions. The pluralism, free inquiry and reasoned debate on which Western civilisation is built face fanaticisms from both the Left and Right. The non-totalitarian centre is shrinking. A very dark place indeed.

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