

Lefties rage at academic who dares to stand up for the Empire

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It's autumn, so up go the posters for the student union election. Candidates compete for the most emancipatory manifesto, and a regular promise is to 'decolonialise' curricula. How far we have come from the world map in my primary school, with its pink flourish marking the expansive territories of the British Empire (albeit Commonwealth by my time). Our imperial past is now a source of shame to the Left and the liberal intelligentsia, and black and Asian citizens are encouraged to claim victimhood, regardless of where and when they were born, and how long ago independence was gained. Wear a costume of the British Raj for fancy dress, or be found in possession of Tintin au Congo, and you'll be in trouble.

A professor of political science at Portland State University has really put the cat among the pigeons. Bruce Gilley, once a Commonwealth Scholar at Oxford University, wrote an opinion article in the journal *Third World Quarterly* titled 'The case for colonialism'. It was not enough to accuse Gilley of racism, or of producing a Trump tweet with footnotes. The academic establishment has recoiled in horror at this anathema being published, and a petition demands a full retraction and apology. Half of the journal's 34-strong editorial board has resigned.

What did Gilley actually write? Well, I can readily find statements that would send a social science faculty into a fit of fits. So badly have post-colonial administrations performed, Gilley avers, that the First World should recolonise the most chaotic states, or 'build new Western colonies from scratch'. He challenges three 'failures of anti-colonial critique': that the old European empires were harmful, illegitimate, and offensive to the sensibilities of contemporary society. All of these are indeed true by today's ideology, but Gilley appeals for a reappraisal.

Schooling for both boys and girls, a properly-functioning civil service, railways bringing outlying regions into the 19th or 20th century (not merely for troop movements, as some revisionists argue), a reliable postal service, hospitals, immunisation and relief for natural disasters. By the Victorian era, settlers had cleaned up their act and many governors exerted philanthropic zeal. Against all that, there were brutal responses to uprisings, institutionalised racial superiority and stifling of native autonomy. But it is retrospective fantasy to portray all inhabitants of African and Asian colonies as miserable subjects of oppressive white man. Food production and distribution increased substantially, leading to healthy population growth in many hitherto tribal and frankly primitive regions.

Gilley's article was coincidentally relevant to my current bedtime reading. *City of Thorns* by Ben Rawlence describes the lives of refugees in the enormous Dadaab camps in northern Kenya. With a whole country's populace fleeing its homeland because of al-Shabaab militants and famine, while the corrupt Kenyan authorities prosper on badly-managed international aid, a pertinent question is: was either Somalia or Kenya worse in the past than now? I'm not agreeing with Gilley's proposals (Rawlence

certainly wouldn't), but for all the faults of the British and Italian administrators, at least they laid the foundations for modern civic governance.

Of course, slavery will be raised as a dark stain on imperial history. Schoolchildren are led to believe that the British were the main culprit in this crime against humanity, overlooking the lead taken by this country in abolishing the cruel practice. After the Slave Trade Act, the Royal Navy blockade of West Africa captured 1,600 slave ships and freed 150,000 slaves. As a civilised Christian country, Britain was determined to rectify its wrongdoings, eventually forcing other European powers to accept anti-slavery treaties.

Atrocities by post-colonial leaders are rarely discussed in secondary or tertiary education in the West. Gilley describes events in Guinea-Bissau before and after independence from Portugal (which tried to cling on to its dominions long after the British and French had relented). Under the despot Amilcar Cabral, tens of thousands were killed in a civil war, rice production plummeted and there was an exodus to Senegal. Few students today know of Idi Amin and his racist regime, while Robert Mugabe is left to his devices (I have heard educated and self-righteous English people ask 'Why should white people still be living there?'). And it wasn't only home-grown dictators to worry about: as the West packed its bags, Soviet- or Sino-communism threatened to take over. Today, Gilley asserts that too many countries are 'stuck in anti-colonial protest identities', and their people suffer as a result.

The reaction to Gilley's article is sadly predictable. Instead of engaging with the arguments that he presents, reviewers have trawled for factual inaccuracies, while most of those calling for Gilley's head have probably not even read the paper. They don't feel the need: the sentiment is enough. University teaching and campus culture allow only a pejorative on the European imperial past, while terrorists and post-independence tyrants are excused. The West is always to blame. But as Gilley observes, people in some fragile and corrupt countries are beginning to think the unthinkable: what did the British/Belgians/French/Portuguese/Dutch do for us?