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# Happiness Lens

Neil Thin's research and practice blog on life enhancement and ultimate values

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## Colonialism, appreciative history, and the trials of academic heterodoxy.



### What have the Romans ever done for us?

What have the Romans ever done for us? That phrase from *Life of Brian* popped into my head last year when some over-zealous undergraduates publicly labeled some of my Edinburgh colleagues as ‘racists’ simply because they had dared to start a conversation in class about the pros and cons of colonialism. I wondered whether any fully mature academics could similarly believe that genuinely evaluative discussion of colonialism is morally off limits. Sadly this turns out to be the case. It seems large numbers of academics have forgotten Monty Python’s superb satire of people who can’t or won’t cope with moral complexity. Either that, or they remember it too well, and fear they

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might be upset by some of the answers people will give to the question.

Last year, US political historian [Bruce Gilley](#) wrote a fascinating piece exploring the many instances, over many years, when Nigerian author Chinua Achebe discussed the ‘positive’ aspects of Britain’s colonial legacies – in defiant and eloquent contradiction of his own anti-colonialist reputation. Like most academic papers, it was read by very few people. Both Gilley’s writing and Achebe’s exemplify the kind of nuanced and balanced ‘appreciative’ approach to history that is needed if we are to learn useful lessons from the past. Bear in mind, however, that when former [South African Democratic Party](#) [Helen Zille](#) was recently vilified for referring to some colonial benefits, it was of little use to her to point out that Nelson Mandela and Kenneth Kaunda had made similar observations. She is ‘white’, and therefore apparently not entitled to express a balanced or appreciative view of history even when this has clearly constructive purposes relating to contemporary planning. Google “Zille supremacist” and you’ll get a sense of the disturbingly monochrome and infantile responses. ‘Let’s be honest’ she pleaded in a tweet. No, let’s not, say the baying hordes.

Recently, however, Gilley went a step further and wrote a slightly more provocative piece that should – in our electronic and hence blessedly unburnable era – have many thousands of people debating both colonialism and the pros and cons of academic honesty. At the moment, the debates are undignified and unpleasant (Google “Gilley supremacist” or “Gilley racist” and you’ll get the picture), and the article has been withdrawn. Some have suggested that Gilley’s paper may have been written as clickbait. Perhaps he really wanted the hounds to gather at his door. Perhaps the title, ‘The case for colonialism’, might have been more cautiously worded. But the predictably shrill and authoritarian responses to his paper imply that you’re not allowed to discuss the more benign aspects of colonialism (which, let’s *try* to be honest, is an extremely broad and diverse set of concepts and experiences) without a crowd shrieking ‘but what about the atrocities?’

‘Considering the pros and cons of colonialism’ is really what the paper’s about, and you can sort of see how a casual skim-read might make you believe he was seriously advocating a wholesale return to colonial governance. Still, anyone who’s read it carefully will have seen

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that he stops short of the positions he's been repeatedly accused of. He doesn't pretend there was nothing awful about colonialism. He doesn't suggest that bringing it back would generally be a good thing. Remember, his stated purposes are to consider whether colonial regimes had some strengths and benefits worth learning from. This is a perfectly reasonable thing to try to do. We could all spend the rest of our lives condemning and exposing the horrors of colonialism and racism, but there are diminishing returns to the educational value of such texts.

### Academic integrity

Let's suppose that most of us can agree that the job of a 'progressive' academic is to help people consider how humanity might live better, in well-run decent societies. So far, looking at the fallout, Gilley's little experiment has failed miserably in that regard because the quality of debate has been appalling. We may well disagree strongly with Gilley's pessimism about postcolonial governance and development, and with his optimism about possible new pockets of consensual colonial governance. But what matters here is whether the questions he has raised have plausibly benign purposes. And if not, or if he used evidence implausibly, the proper academic response is to explain these flaws and offer better arguments.

Lots of the critiques of Gilley have questioned his 'integrity' and that of the journal. In fact, most of the online critiques fail to spell out credible reasons for rejecting his arguments, let alone silencing them. [The first of the two signed academic petitions](#) contains important and tendentious untruths about the paper. His argument, they claim, is that without colonialism most populations 'would have remained "primitive" ... 'an obscene, reductive, colonial epithet'. Take careful note: this epithet which they object to *doesn't actually occur in his paper*. Oops. They also claim that he advocates 'invasive, forced Western governance'. No, actually this is what he says: 'Colonialism can return ...only with the consent of the colonised.' Spot the difference? And again, they argue that Gilley 'infantilizes and dehumanizes BIPOC ['people of colour'] by claiming that they are incapable of self-governance'. Again, *this argument occurs nowhere in Gilley's text*; the shriek mob have simply made it up.

This kind of deceitfulness only serves to support his argument that naive anticolonialists aren't interested in truth. Worse still,

signatories' online comments are replete with racist slurs against Gilley and against white people in general, and with further absurdly slanderous claims that Gilley's piece advocates and justifies violence.

Authors of the petition should be hanging their heads in shame and weeping at their own lack of moral fibre. This has been a 'post-truth' year but this latest twist of academics prostituting themselves to political campaigns is tragic. Third World Quarterly's stated purpose in publishing the piece was to promote rational debate, which has already been stifled by deliberate lies told by fellow academics who all indulged in an unseemly feeding frenzy, condemning a serious academic largely on crass identitarian grounds – for being 'white', 'offensive', and 'racist'.

So even if you find Gilley's article misguided or wilfully provocative, you should feel still more troubled by the ill-informed responses to it. When people condemn a paper they haven't read, and when they try to stop others from reading it, they reveal a collective preference for ignorance. Let's hope that some people will see beyond the furore to find ways of carrying on important moral debates in more kindly and constructive ways.

### **Deep breath: let's all think about appreciative evaluation**

If you've glanced at previous items on this site you'll be aware of two things. First, my overall purpose is to promote ethical transparency through adoption of a happiness lens in academic and public discourse. Second, this entails reasonably balanced consideration of both 'negative' and 'positive' aspects of life, so that we don't fall into the default sociologist's and social justice warrior's habit of letting our complaints drown out any sense of balanced evaluation or appreciation of the good things in life. Making your evaluative lens explicit is especially crucial in areas of debate where personal and collective passions run high, such as in debates over colonial legacies and about grand-scale political agendas for fragile postcolonial states.

So in a paradoxical way I'm grateful to the large group of scholars who have complained about Gilley's article and argued for its immediate withdrawal by editors of the journal Third World Quarterly. Without their censorious intervention, I and thousands of others would have missed out on this stimulating piece, which has within a couple of

weeks become the most widely-read (or at least widely-cited) article in the journal's history.

Polemical to the point of being deliberately controversial, Gilley's essay is nonetheless carefully argued and thoroughly moral even if some of his arguments are blunt and overdrawn (it was presented as a 'Viewpoint' not as a full-length research article, so neither blandness nor full-scale empiricism were really called for). In recommending cautiously appreciative approaches to the moral evaluation of colonialism, Gilley shows unambiguously benign intentions. He knew perfectly well that some readers would be unhappy about his messages. But he believes that the future wellbeing of humanity depends on honest and intelligent debates about colonialism. He feels, with good reason, that such debates have been unduly stifled by too many unrealistically negative portrayals of the colonial legacy. He also reiterates a crucial argument that has been made since the 1960s yet is still relevant today: naive anti-colonialism is a dangerous political weapon that is commonly abused by bad governments who blame colonialism for contemporary ills.

### **We're all descended from rapists, but colonialism was a bit different from the Nazi holocaust**

Yet you'd imagine, from reading some of the responses, that Gilley was a rape apologist or holocaust denialist. Remember, every human being is descended from rapists and pillagers. He's not pretending there are no skeletons in our cupboards, what he's trying to do is get us to derive positive lessons from history. Arguably he's not even a 'colonial apologist' or a 'promoter' of new forms of colonialism, since what he does is explore critically the pros, cons, and moral legitimacy of past and possible future forms of governance. He explicitly accepts that his thought experiment – that some forms of colonialism could be reintroduced without 'oppression, occupation, and exploitation' – may well be a 'preposterous idea'.

Given that the literature on colonialism has for many decades been overwhelmingly negative, anyone brave enough to point out some of the good things that came out of colonial regimes, and to explore the comparative morality of colonial practices with the horrors of some of their predecessors and their postcolonial replacements, should be applauded – provided that they do so in a well-informed and considerate way with some clear moral purposes. A lot of people seem

to believe this last qualifier isn't true of Gilley's piece, which has been variously termed 'racist', 'offensive', and even 'white supremacist' and 'fascist'.

### **Is there a happiness justification for censorship?**

Gilley's paper seems to be understood by thousands of scholars as so obviously evil that it must be withdrawn. This attitude isn't quite the same thing as authoritarian censorship or bookburning, but it comes horribly close. After initially insisting that he stands by every word of his paper, it seems Gilley has already been bullied into the all too familiar position of giving a public apology to those he has 'offended'. And it seems highly likely that Gilley will now join the growing ranks of public intellectuals that students take up arms against in disturbingly intolerant and sometimes violent 'no-platforming' protests. Third World Quarterly have withdrawn the article, giving the explanation that the editor has 'received serious and credible threats of personal violence'. This is a worrying story for anyone who cares about either free and dignified academic debate, or about the planning of a future world in which it would genuinely be preposterous to propose that undemocratic colonisation might in some cases be better than current alternatives.

Let's pause, then, to take the spotlight off Gilley for a moment and consider what kind of intellectual climate would be good for humanity. Looking at the basics, any scholar or member of the public engaging in political debate ought to want the outcome of the debate to shift humanity in the direction of better living in societies that are free, friendly, and fair. Insofar as learning from colonial histories is relevant to these ambitions, we would surely all want to learn about what went badly and about what went well. There can be no intellectual or moral excuse for claiming that colonialism was either all good, or all bad. And when we look at what went badly, our purpose should be to learn how we might henceforth avoid those horrors and pitfalls.

To do so, we must of course not only notice the evils of the colonialists, but explore the qualities of the forms of governance that they replaced, and consider what professional evaluators call 'plausible counterfactual scenarios' – i.e., how things would likely have been without colonialism. In some instances, it is hardly implausible – and certainly not in the least bit 'racist' – to suppose that things might have been even worse in the short or long run without colonial rule.

You would have to be seriously lacking in moral integrity and intellectual fibre to explore colonialism without trying to maintain a degree of evaluative open-mindedness. No matter how outraged and disgusted you may feel about the evils of colonialism, it is hard to find a moral excuse for closing your mind to the reasons why colonial regimes were so often welcomed and supported; why their demise has so often been regretted; and why so many millions of people migrated towards and not away from the areas controlled by colonisers.

### Return to Eden, anyone?

Perhaps, of course – like many anthropologists past and some present – you think humanity would be better off not only without colonialism but without the neolithic revolution. Perhaps you genuinely believe that humanity was better off before agriculture, before the enlightenment and the industrial revolution, and before modernity, living short lives with high rates of violence, food insecurity, disease, and infant mortality. If so, your worldview is pretty odd, and largely irrelevant to our current global challenges. But at least you could logically and morally dismiss many of the colonial achievements that most of us ought to recognize as benefits – national governance, reduced violence (yes, overall and in the long run in most parts of the world, despite the many horrors), economic growth, universal education, life-enhancing technologies, massive reductions in communicable diseases, increased longevity, and so on.

Have a look at the UN Human Development Reports, World Happiness Reports, and Global Peace Index and ask yourself, with as clear a head as you can muster: what's more likely to promote continued world progress – apologising and agonising over the ills of colonialism; wishing ourselves back into a pre-Neolithic age; or getting on with the job of fostering intercultural empathy and kindness, and learning from the many successes and strengths of our ancestors, including those embroiled in the colonial era? To quote Monty Python again: 'Peace? Shut up!'

 Neil Thin  October 7, 2017  Blog  No Comments

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