

Addressing “The Case for Colonialism” viewpoint essay, 26th September 2017

On 8th September 2017, a viewpoint essay, “The case for colonialism”, by Bruce Gilley was published in the journal *Third World Quarterly* (TWQ) on Taylor & Francis Online. This essay has, understandably, sparked enormous controversy both within and beyond academia, resulting in two petitions, media coverage and a social media debate.

Why was this article published?

There have been many accusations that this essay was not peer reviewed, or ‘failed’ multiple rounds of peer review linked to a special issue, and also independent of it. Using the checks in our systems, we can be absolutely clear on the path through peer review this essay took. It was double blind peer-reviewed by two referees (in line with the journal’s policy). The first review was returned with a minor revision recommendation, and the second reviewer made a reject recommendation. Due to the opposing review reports, the final decision to publish was made by the Editor-in-Chief, following the author making major revisions.

These steps, which have also been given to the entire TWQ editorial board, are outlined in full below.

The Case for Colonialism: peer review timeline

24th April 2017: *The Case for Colonialism* is submitted to TWQ via its online submission and peer-review site. This is in response to a call for papers for a forthcoming Special Issue on imperialism.

28th April 2017: The Editor-in-Chief wrote to the Journal Manager via the online submissions site: ‘Please suggest to GE’s [Guest Editors] that TWQ would like them to consider its inclusion in the SI [Imperialism Special Issue]’.

3rd May 2017: The paper was assigned to the Special Issue and sent to the two Guest Editors for assessment.

4th May 2017: The Guest Editors declined to consider the paper for the Special Issue. It was not sent out for peer review and therefore not reviewed or rejected.

10th May 2017: TWQ editorial meeting. Following the guest editors passing on *The Case for Colonialism* for the Special Issue, it was looked at as a possible Viewpoint essay for a regular issue.

23rd May 2017: Three academics were approached by the Journal Manager for reviews; two of them agree. One review is returned on 27th May with a minor revision recommendation, the other reviewer recommends rejection on the 27th June 2017.

7th July 2017: The Editor-in-Chief considers the conflicting reviews. A ‘Major Revision’ decision on *The Case for Colonialism* is taken by the Editor-in-Chief.



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17th July 2017: The author is sent the 'Major Revision' decision by TWQ.

2nd August 2017: The revised version of the Viewpoint essay is submitted to TWQ, together with the author's response to reviewers.

7th August 2017: The Editor-in-Chief makes an 'Accept' decision for *The Case for Colonialism* following an assessment of the revised piece.

15th August 2017: The paper is formally accepted for publication by TWQ as a peer-reviewed Viewpoint essay. A decision letter is sent to the author.

Whilst many have argued (and will argue) that the decision to publish was misguided, the nature of the conflicting review reports meant that the editor-in-chief needed to weigh up their recommendations, make a request to the author for major revisions, and then assess those revisions before using his judgement in choosing to accept the essay. This is very common across all journals and is something he has done throughout the journal's 40-year history, playing a pivotal role in developing its reputation for post-colonial scholarship.

Why can we not just withdraw the article?

As journal publishers, we operate under the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Code of Conduct. Among other things, COPE set out [guidelines](#) for situations in which a paper might be retracted. Peer-reviewed research articles cannot simply be withdrawn but must have grounds for retraction. These parameters exist in order to keep the scholarly record intact and so academic discourse cannot be shaped by any one opinion. Any request to change the scholarly record needs to follow a fair and transparent process, which is in line with these guidelines. As the publisher it is our role to treat this case as we would any other. On Thursday 21st September, the author contacted the journal's editorial team, requesting the essay be withdrawn. In subsequent discussion with the author we have explained the above procedure and guidelines that we follow in all cases. As a result, the article remains online.

In publishing this essay, it was never our, or the Editor-in-Chief's, intention to cause offence or to open academic discourse up to 'click-bait'. We wholeheartedly apologize to those who have seen this as such but, as the publisher, we stand by the peer review process which led to this essay being published and defend the right of our academic journal editors and editorial boards to remain independent in their decision-making.

Third World Quarterly is a journal with a long-standing history of balanced debate, and, as with all Routledge journals, it follows industry-wide best practice in its peer-review and publication process. As an organization, Routledge has a history of publishing challenging, peer-reviewed content across the social sciences, opening up new paths for research which shape the fields in which our journals publish. Through nearly 200 years, we have not shied away from publishing what some may see as controversial material, maintaining strict editorial independence on our journals whilst ensuring the articles we publish go through a rigorous peer-review process and follow the policies we put in place as a company. This essay did undergo those processes and so, whilst its contents may make many of us uncomfortable (and indeed upset), we do not see it as our role to censor what is undoubtedly a highly controversial view.



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What next for *Third World Quarterly*?

Over the course of the last two weeks, the Editor-in-Chief has been in touch with those members of the editorial board who have tendered their resignation to clarify the rigor of the peer-review process and express his heartfelt sorrow at the upset the publication of this Viewpoint essay has caused. It was never his intention to cause the pain this piece has generated but instead to bring a controversial view to light so that it could be challenged by researchers within the field. He has also informed the journal's editorial board that he would like to work with them to examine the editorial decision-making process. This would include creating an Advisory Board to implement and oversee a new editorial structure that better supports a future Editor-in-Chief to lead the journal's future. In these actions, he has our full support as his publisher.

Leon Heward-Mills, Global Publishing Director (Journals)
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