



## ESSAYS

# THE ARTICLE THAT MADE 16,000 IDEOLOGUES GO WILD

OCTOBER 4, 2017 | PETER WOOD | [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Portland State University scholar Bruce Gilley drew a lot of attention with his August 29 article on Minding the Campus, “[Why I’m leaving the Political Science Association.](#)” A week or so later, he provoked an even greater controversy by telling readers of the *Third World Quarterly* what they don’t want to hear.

“[The Case for Colonialism](#)” was by ordinary academic standards a straightforward opinion essay: well-reasoned, well-informed, and cognizant of conflicting views. It had passed peer review and the judgment of the journal’s editor. A contemporary scholar arguing the case in favor of a positive judgment of the history of Western colonialism, however, was clearly venturing into territory that carried the risk of adverse reaction among his peers. It wasn’t long before that reaction arrived.

Bruce Gilley happens to be the head of the National Association of Scholars' Oregon affiliate. I know him through that connection and have seen him take strong stands in defense of academic and intellectual freedom on several previous occasions.

## The Onslaught

Professor Gilley's cordiality, however, proved of little avail in the weeks that followed the publication of "The Case for Colonialism." Both the article and the author came under ferocious attack. Soon the journal that published the article also came under attack. Opponents:

- Demanded that the journal retract the article.
- Insisted Bruce Gilley apologize for writing it.
- Circulated a [petition](#), drafted by Jenny Heijun Wills (associate professor of English and Director of the Critical Race Network, University of Winnipeg) and signed by 6,884 others, which begins, "We insist that you, *Third World Quarterly*, retract and apologize for the publication of Professor Bruce Gilley's appalling article..."
- Circulated another [petition](#), drafted by Maxine Horne (a dancer who has a master's degree in project management from the University of Salford in the U.K.) which garnered 10,693 signatures.
- Attacked Gilley ad hominem, in the [words](#) of Farhana Sultana (associate professor of Geography & Research Director for Environmental Conflicts and Collaborations, Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University) claiming the article promotes "white supremacy," purveys "shoddy scholarship," is based on "racist or violent ideologies," and caricaturing Gilley for publishing "drivel." Sultana also co-signed Horne's petition.
- [Wished](#) for Princeton University to revoke Gilley's Ph.D.

Fifteen members of the 34-member editorial board of *Third World Quarterly* resigned in protest of its publication of Gilley's article.

## A Limp Reaction from Academia

The publisher Taylor and Francis responded to the furor by issuing a document where it recounted step by step the review of Gilley's article before it was accepted for publication. The accusation that the article was not peer-reviewed or properly vetted by qualified scholars proved to be without foundation.

The Interim Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Portland State University, Margaret Everett, responding to calls from recent graduates that Gilley be fired, issued a bland statement declaring, "Academic freedom is critical to the open debate and free exchange of knowledge and argument. Because of Portland State University's commitment to academic freedom, we acknowledge the right of all our faculty to explore scholarship and to speak, write and publish a variety of viewpoints

and conclusions. The university also respects the rights of others to express counterviews and to engage in vigorous and constructive debate about the faculty's work." The president of the university, Wim Wiewel, likewise **declared** that "The bedrock principles embedded in our educational mission as a public university are to value robust debate of ideas and to protect academic freedom," but took no action to defend Gilley from the personal and professional attacks. Those attacks included death threats.

The temporizing defense of Professor Gilley as the rhetoric and threats escalated, apparently left Professor Gilley to decide that the better part of valor was to withdraw the article and mouth the apology that his critics demanded. He did so under what he calls the "onslaught," but now regrets it. He is back in the fight.

## The Cork

I'm not eager to turn dissenting professors into martyrs. I understand the considerable pressures that can be brought to bear on nonconformists in academe, including those like Professor Gilley who have tenure. But there is nothing in the article either in its substance or its tone that warranted its withdrawal. Professor Gilley retracted it in the hope of quieting a destructive tempest. It didn't.

It wasn't enough for the "critics"—though calling them critics is to cheapen the term. What has emerged is a clique of radicals who are ready to resort to violence to silence views they don't like. The editor of *Third World Quarterly*, Shahid Khan, who stood by his judgment of the value of Gilley's article, has been met with death threats from Indian nationalists. After Gilley "withdrew" it, the publisher left it available in electronic form. That infuriates those who would like the article to disappear entirely.

Because of the controversy, "The Case for Colonialism" has surely garnered far more readers than anything else that *Third World Quarterly* has ever published, and far more readers than it would have absent the controversy. We need not lament that Professor Gilley's views on the merits of colonialism will be buried in obscurity. The problem lies elsewhere.

It lies in the successful deployment of professional opprobrium and actual threats of murder to kill the article. That success was ultimately aimed at ensuring that other scholars who dissent from the contemporary orthodoxy of anti-colonialism will keep their mouths shut. It is further aimed at ensuring that generations of students will see no whisper of dissent from this orthodoxy in the published literature, and hear no hint of it from their instructors.

The desire of the anti-colonialist faction to reach beyond Gilley to intimidate other scholars who might pick up his thread is a backhanded acknowledgment of Gilley's credibility and the force of his argument. Numerous scholars in the field are saying things to the effect that recognition of the positive effects of colonialism is long overdue. Such accolades are circulating widely but not—or not yet—openly. The anti-colonialist faction knows this and is desperate to keep the cork in the bottle.

## Feckless College Presidents

One way the cork is kept in place is by intimidating college and university authorities. If the dean, provost, and presidents were living up to their responsibilities, they would be opening misconduct investigations in instances where faculty members have sought to intimidate, threaten, or censor views they disagree with. If academic freedom is to mean anything at all, it has to be enforced. We are in a period where college authorities frequently do nothing in the face of shout-downs of invited speakers and actual campus riots. Mizzou, Yale, Middlebury, Claremont McKenna, and Evergreen stand out in the public eye as the exemplars of such nonfeasance on the part of college presidents.

The whip of public scorn was enough to convince the presidents of Middlebury, Claremont McKenna, and Evergreen to take token actions against a handful of the student rioters—and no action at all against the faculty members who instigated them. But the general picture remains that college authorities do as little as they possibly can to maintain public order on campus when that order is threatened or violated by progressive activists.

And they do even less when it comes to faculty activists who engage in behavior wholly at odds with academic freedom. More often than not, college presidents offer a false equivalence between the right of a faculty member to say something “controversial” and the spurious “right” of other faculty members to threaten and intimidate that person. There is no such right. In the context of higher education, disagreement must be grounded in arguments and evidence, not in menace.

The framing of these issues as matters of “controversy” is itself misleading. Academic freedom exists to give knowledgeable individuals scope to pursue the truth. It is not a license to pursue controversy for its own sake. Professor Gilley’s arguments about colonialism are presented entirely in the framework of promoting “human flourishing” and respecting “the consent of the colonized.” His essay says something unexpected—that, in some circumstances, Western colonialism was good and might still be considered a viable choice—but Gilley’s aim is morally serious and ought not to be trivialized as merely seeking after controversy.

Thus the Gilley affair is yet another reminder of the hollowness of the university’s leaders. Confronted with a straightforward example of academic thuggery, they stand perplexed, unwilling to draw a meaningful line anywhere between legitimate expression of ideas and mob rule.

## Determinations

Will the publisher Taylor and Francis give in to the threat that the editor of *Third World Quarterly* will be murdered if Gilley’s article is not made to disappear? At this writing, we don’t know. I’ll assume that the publisher will summon the courage to stand its ground.

But the academics who made such a threat deserve our outrage, and so too the numerous academics who did not themselves make the threat but who escalated the rhetoric and the abuse to the point where the threat was but a small step further in the direction of academic thuggery.

But outrage at the follies in higher education is a devalued currency these days. Professor Gilley, in fact, has found many who support his right to publish his views, regardless of whether they agree with his points. Notably, Noam Chomsky has come to his defense. Many others see the sense of Gilley's main arguments: that Western colonialism eventuated in better conditions in many parts of the world and that anti-colonial ideology in many cases ruined newly independent nations. The record of health, education, and welfare in the Third World testifies to these theses to anyone who is not constrained by radical anti-Western beliefs to ignore the facts.

No one denies that colonialism sometimes had dire costs, including the sense of humiliation that often was inflicted on the colonized. The colonizers themselves paid a stiff price as well, not least in their unearned sense of superiority. Yet there is plainly a strong argument to be made that, on balance, the legacy of colonialism has been positive. Agree or disagree with that view; it ought to be well within the compass of ideas that can be debated in academic journals and on campus.

What then ought to be the path forward for those who truly support academic and intellectual freedom –and who want to do more than mouth the piety that these are “critical” to the university?

The answer isn't a single action but a single determination. The Gilley affair is, of course, only one of many instances in the last few years in which the progressive left has shown its willingness to bully, to censor, and sometimes physically attack those it designates as its enemies. College presidents and trustees must cease to pretend that this is a matter of competing forms of free speech. The freedom of one side to be vilified and the freedom of the other side to launch outrageous personal attacks are not moral equivalents. No university can long survive this kind of intellectual dissipation, no matter how eagerly it masks itself as protection of the weak and marginal. It has become its own form of tyranny, and the public will not long stand for it.

Public universities such as Portland State have vulnerabilities in the form of state and federal funding as well as enrollment. In time, politicians and the public will act in default of campus authorities who do not act. And perhaps we should not forget the names of those thousands who signed the petitions. It might be a good exercise for deans and provosts who have received from academic search committee recommendations to appoint candidates for academic positions to match those names against the list of signatories. Signing such petitions, after all, is a public declaration of hostility to the very principles that the university say are “bedrock.” A candidate's name on such a petition at least raises a question of whether such a person is to be relied on to uphold the standards of a free intellectual community.

What can be done? At the minimum, Portland State University should call on Taylor and Francis to keep the article and defend the editor, Shahid Khan.



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◀ COLONIALISM

◀ FREE SPEECH

◀ LEFTIST BIAS