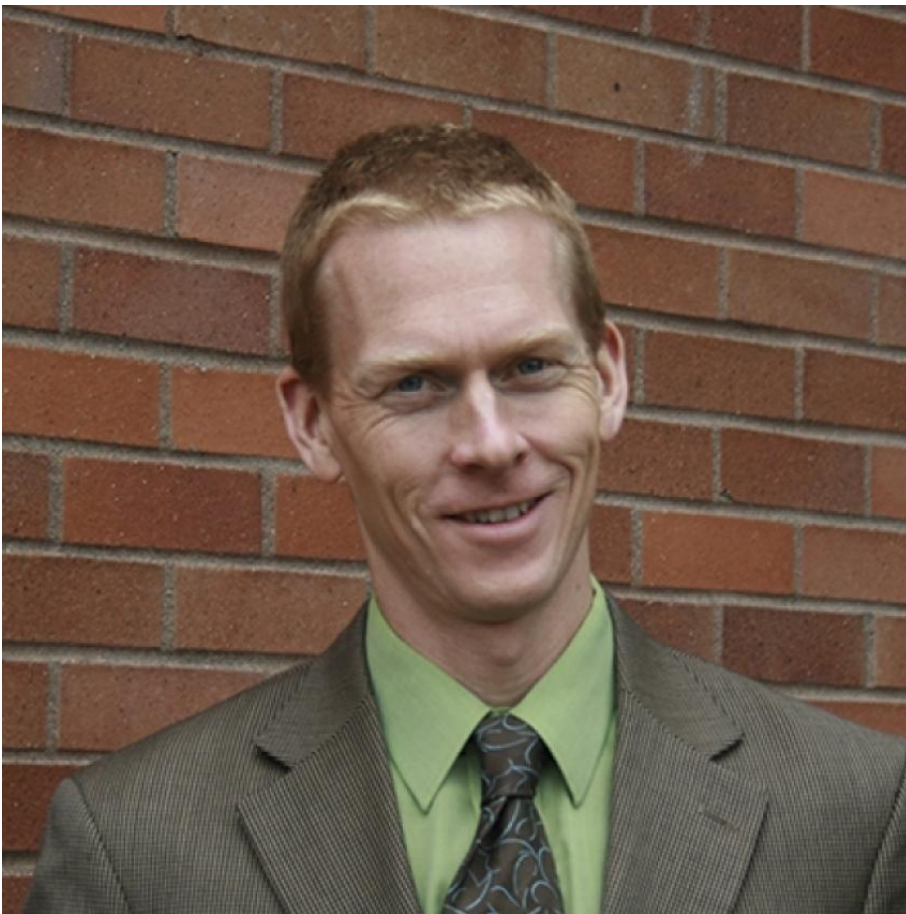


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RESEARCH

Last Fall This Scholar Defended Colonialism. Now He's Defending Himself.

By Vimal Patel | MARCH 21, 2018



Portland State U.

Bruce Gilley's full-throated defense of colonialism caused an uproar last September.

Gilley, a professor of political science at Portland State University, in Oregon, made the unpopular argument in an article for an obscure but respected journal, *Third World Quarterly*. Thumbing his nose at the overwhelming majority of recent scholarship, he wrote that colonialism had improved many lives, whereas "a century of anticolonial regimes and policies" had taken "a grave human toll."

Within days, the professor and the journal had been swarmed with criticism. A petition urging the journal to retract the article gathered more than 10,000

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signatures. Fifteen members of its editorial board resigned, aghast at the publication of work they deemed unfit.

Soon Gilley agreed to the withdrawal of the article, titled "The Case for Colonialism," after the journal's editor received death threats.

On the *Third World Quarterly* board and among the broader public, the controversy raised two competing narratives. To some, the reaction to the article demonstrated scholars' diminished tolerance for dissenting political views, especially conservative ones.

"The dominant view, before anyone knew anything, was, We can't have this article," says Thomas G. Weiss, a political-science professor at the City University of New York's Graduate Center. Weiss, a *Third World Quarterly* board member, didn't resign. Instead, the professor, who says he "totally disagrees" with Gilley's argument, made a counterthreat of resignation, saying he would leave if the paper were retracted. "It was all a little like the contemporary discourse these days in the United States," he says.

Others, however, say their primary concern wasn't policing Gilley's ideas but maintaining the standards of an academic journal and the peer-review process. As one critic put it, the article was "the academic equivalent of a Trump tweet, clickbait with footnotes."

Stefano Ponte, a professor of international political economy at the Copenhagen Business School, was one of the board members who resigned. Ponte says he disagreed with Gilley's analysis before — for example, in an article the political scientist wrote about the legacies of colonialism for the journal *African Affairs* — but Ponte respected the scholarship. The *Third World Quarterly* article, however, was poorly argued, an op-ed piece that failed to sufficiently engage with prior research on the topic, Ponte says.

"There are very clear rules of engagement in academia," he says. "We're not a blog."

The controversy dropped out of sight as quickly as it had erupted, but the blowback to the scholars involved was just beginning. Some of the professors who had organized the petition to retract Gilley's article found themselves the subject of online harassment. Beyond the mass resignations, the reputational damage to *Third World Quarterly* itself remains unclear. Some scholars retracted their own articles from the London-based journal. The editor, Shahid Qadir, did not respond to a message for this article.

At the center of the flap was Gilley, a frequent critic of academe's liberal leanings and what he describes as its growing intolerance for conservative thought. The professor too has faced repercussions. Chief among them, he says, is an investigation opened by his university's diversity office. Gilley describes the investigation as "a gross abuse of process" that is "entirely motivated by my article."

A Portland State spokesman confirmed the investigation, but declined to discuss details. "The university is obligated to investigate any claims of discrimination and harassment made by students, faculty, and staff," he said in a written statement. "This investigation is not politically motivated, nor is it an investigation of the article."

The Chronicle spoke recently with Gilley about the aftermath of the article's withdrawal and why he thinks academe is becoming increasingly illiberal. The interview has been edited for space and clarity.

Q. How did you, a political scientist, end up writing about colonialism?

A. State building is an absolutely core concern for political scientists. I'm a comparativist, and I work on foreign-government systems. I kept coming back to this idea of why this period of colonial governance, particularly after World War I, was the most successful period for many of these countries, however you measure it: life expectancy, food production, population, public health, education, wage growth, rule of law, human rights, all of these things.

Q. A journal editor in an email to me made the comparison between colonialism and genocide — that journals have an ethical responsibility to reject an article defending colonialism just as they do one defending genocide. This journal editor's position seems to be that pointing out the pros and cons of genocide is beyond acceptable debate. And so it should be with colonialism as well.

A. It's an absurd analogy. Genocide, I think everyone would agree, is a moral wrong. There's absolutely no plausible philosophical argument that one group of people establishing authority over another is an inherent moral wrong. Human history is all about alien rule. The Crees ruled most people in the Midwest. The Muganda controlled most of the people in central Africa. Alien rule is how history has always worked, and it's how it's continued to work in postcolonial periods.

Q. What was life like for you on campus during this time?

A. I happened to be on sabbatical this year, by fortuitous coincidence. It was a very hostile campus environment, to be sure. The university put out a statement that said, in effect, I can't be fired, I have tenure. Basically, their support for an academic conducting research who was being attacked by totalitarian ideologues was, "Sorry, we can't fire this guy." In my view, that was disgraceful.

[In a written statement, Portland State said the university "does not endorse the viewpoint of Professor Gilley's article," but it affirmed "the right of all our faculty to explore scholarship and to speak, write, and publish a variety of viewpoints and conclusions."]

Some students then filed a harassment claim against me, claiming that I'm engaging in prohibited harassment and discrimination. So for the last four months I've been subject to a wide-ranging investigation by our diversity office. I have an attorney now, and have been engaging in a lot of back and forth. This is a gross abuse of process. It's the failure

of the university to prevent students from using that process, which has a very specific purpose, to protect people who are subject to discrimination or harassment. And it's entirely motivated by my article.

Q. Can you tell me any more about the investigation?

A. I can't go into details. They have not issued a finding.

The result of all this is that the people who came out calling for retraction or punishment have egg on their faces. The backlash against that has been far more significant than the initial outpouring against my article. Any number of yoga instructors and baristas can sign a petition. But if you look at the institutional response, such as the letter to *The Times* of London signed by 80 academics, they say this response has been worrying to journal editors, who have a mandate to encourage debate on important issues.

Q. That sounds like a paradox. It seems as if you're saying academe is on your side. On the other hand, you've said it's becoming more illiberal. How do you reconcile that?

A. There are two separate issues. One is the substantive issue of colonialism. I think the academy remains highly illiberal and intolerant of my viewpoint. It remains the case that most of the people who supported me didn't support me because they agreed with my argument. I think my supporters came in two types: those who agreed with my argument, and others who said that even bad arguments that have gone through the process of being published should be responded to, not silenced.

Q. Your critics also came in two varieties. Some didn't think your ideas were worthy of being heard. Another group says its concern has primarily been one of process — that your paper didn't meet the bar for scholarship and the *Third World Quarterly* editorial process was hazy and not clearly explained, even to board members. The board members who resigned were concerned that a peer reviewer had rejected your paper.

A. There were two reviewers. One said, "reject." One said, "accept."

I think where the confusion arose was, there was a special issue on the new imperialism. I initially submitted my article for consideration for that special issue. The editors of that special issue looked at it and said, No, this is not suitable for our special issue. Obviously this wasn't suitable for their special issue because their special issue was going to be a critique of what they considered the latest round of imperialism. My article did not share their ideological slant. It was therefore, ipso facto, not appropriate for their special issue. That was a desk rejection, not a peer-review rejection.

That's why Shahid Qadir then said, Let's just put it in the hopper for a general submission, which is what it went through. It came back with one positive and one negative review.

Q. Have you talked to Shahid Qadir since the controversy?

A. I have not. Not since he called me and said, "We're getting death threats. Do you mind if we withdrew it?" It's important to remember the article was not retracted. It was withdrawn with my consent. That's quite different from retraction.

Q. Tell me about that decision. What sorts of issues were you weighing as you decided what to do with your article?

A. I said, "Of course." The first thing that went through my head was, "Thank God I live in obscure Oregon and not in London." The article was already out there anyways. It will always be out there. It doesn't matter to me in terms of racking up another peer-reviewed article. So I immediately agreed to it.

Q. Noam Chomsky, who publicly defended you, is still on the *Third World Quarterly* board. Was it surprising that a prominent leftist like Chomsky defended you?

A. It's the well-known schism between the old left and the new left. Noam Chomsky is a member of the old left, and the old left was fully conversant in the importance of debate and dialectic. It's the new left, the cultural left, the safe-spaces left, that is where the schism is. I was not surprised with that.

Q. I read an essay from last year in which you explained why you were leaving the American Political Science Association. In that essay you wrote that conservatives who write about the academy often think there's a conspiracy to keep conservatives out, but that you don't think that's the case. So why do you think there aren't more conservatives in academe?

A. There's a famous study of housing segregation by Thomas Schelling. He showed that if you model a situation where people have a weak preference for living next to people who mostly look like them — they're OK having a few black neighbors, but they don't want more than half of their neighbors to be black — the aggregate consequence of that, as it ripples through the system, is the entire neighborhood becomes white. I think that exactly is what happened in the academy.

It's not that people don't want conservative colleagues or are actively hostile to them. But they have a weak preference for liberals, and what happens over time is it aggregates into a purely liberal academy. What this means is, I go to work every day with reasonable, smart, thoughtful people who are not on a witch hunt.

There's often a question: Do we need affirmative action for conservatives? Of course the answer is no. But we do have to think about the same questions we do with other forms of diversity, like how do we maintain an intentionality in protecting and representing the plurality of American society in the academy.

Q. In the essay, you wrote that you were a swing voter, not a conservative.

A. I'm a Canadian, so I just can't make the cut as a conservative in this country. In the Canadian liberal spectrum, I'm definitely on the conservative side. But in the U.S., I'm a swing voter because too many of my viewpoints are liberal here. I often say to my colleagues, If I'm your token conservative, then you've really got problems. Because I don't make the cut here.

Q. There was a section, prominently displayed in your résumé, titled "Scholarly Impact Metrics." This led some scholars to suggest you were motivated by a desire for attention. How much are you thinking about the potential reach of a piece of scholarship?

A. The ultimate flaw of that argument is, I'm fully tenured. I'm not trying to make an impact on the professional ladder because I've already climbed to the top.

Secondly, I was a journalist prior to my career as an academic. So yes, I have a tendency to write clear and concise prose that is widely read. I know what a good headline is. And "The Case for Colonialism" was a good headline.

Vimal Patel covers graduate education. Follow him on Twitter @vimalpatel232, or write to him at vimal.patel@chronicle.com.

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