

“The Case for Colonialism” and the Closing of the Academic Mind

Canadian Lone Wolf: Musings of a Conscientious Canadian Conservative

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I was struck by a story in this morning's *Star* about a recent article published the *Third World Quarterly*, a scholarly journal devoted to... well... the study of the third world. The offending article, by Bruce Gilley, a Portland State Political Scientist, is titled “The Case for Colonialism” and makes the arguments, among others, that Western Colonialism was “both objectively beneficial and subjectively legitimate in most of the places where it was found”. Furthermore, he criticizes the long-line of anti-colonial scholarship which, in his view, provides a distorted and politically motivated assessment of the merits (or lack thereof) of colonialism. Now his main point about the merits of colonialism is contestable, and I'm not sure I would subscribe to that thesis on balance, though can't contest his claim that colonialism had costs as well. His secondary point, that anti-colonial scholarship is distorted and politically motivated... well... read on.

To read the reaction, you'd think he'd fed a puppy into a tree shredder live on the internet. It's worth reading Gilley's piece before considering the response, if only to fully understand how unbalanced it is. Two scholars at LSE described it as “the academic equivalent of a Trump tweet, clickbait with footnotes.” Ilan Kapoor, A York university professor commented: That it appeared in a respected journal devoted to anti-colonial politics, made it “the equivalent of a journal devoted to Holocaust studies publishing that the Holocaust didn't happen.” (Aside, what does it say about Professor Kapoor that he doesn't think the journal should publish papers which dissent from it's anti-colonial politics? Surely, the willingness to publish an ideological heterodox paper is the mark of any respected journal.)

10,000+ people have signed a petition calling on the journal to retract the article. Note, what these reactions don't do, is critically respond to Gilley's piece. These critics are engaged in the academic equivalent of putting their fingers in their ears and say “la, la, la, la, you're wrong”. Arguing that colonialism had benefits is not the same as arguing that the Holocaust didn't happen. At most it's the same as arguing that the Nazi's build good autobahn's. (They did. And acknowledging that historical fact doesn't make you a Nazi.) The Holocaust DID happen, colonialism DID have benefits, to suggest otherwise is to engage in precisely the intellectual distortions that are the subject of Gilley's accusations. Their reaction to his paper validates his contention.

Nathan Robinson, in *Current Affairs* makes a similar claim: “Instead, in his presentation of colonialism's record, Gilley has deliberately excluded mention of every single atrocity committed by a colonial power. Instead of evaluating the colonial record empirically, he has distorted that record, concealing evidence of gross crimes against humanity. The result is not only unscholarly, but is morally tantamount to Holocaust denial.”

In this respect Robinson is unfair and guilty of a distortion of his own. Of course, he's right to emphasize that an assessment of the merits of colonialism has to assess its costs. But to suggest that Gilley “has deliberately excluded mention of every single atrocity committed by a colonial power” is absurd. After all, Gilley is making the claim that the bulk (but as he points out, not all) of the existing academic research emphasizes nothing but those costs, a backdrop that he readily acknowledges. Moreover, he is writing in a scholarly journal whose readers, one might think, are aware of the adverse historical record of colonialism. In that context, to criticize Gilley for failing to discuss “every single atrocity committed by a colonial

power” is simply preposterous. To suggest that Gilley’s work is “morally tantamount to Holocaust denial” is offensive and unworthy of consideration. Surely to god an academic writing a scholar paper, published in a scholarly article, is entitled to proceed on the assumption that his audience are not complete fools and are familiar with the generally accepted facts of the field which they study. Apparently not.

Other critics, while trying to engage him on the substantive points, inadvertently confirm his thesis that anti-colonial scholarship too often distorts history. Take Dr. Sahar Khan, at the Cato Institute. In her blog, she states: “Gilley attributes the abolition of slave-trading to colonialism, which in addition to being ridiculous, is factually incorrect . . . Systematic decolonization and subsequent wars of independence eventually ended the slave trade.”

With respect to Dr. Khan, she is simply wrong on this point. The abolition of the slave trade, globally, in the 19th and early 20th centuries was a direct consequence of the imperial expansion of European colonial powers, notably Great Britain, and the imposition of their laws and values on what we would once have described as the “third world”. Indeed, one constant in British foreign policy in the last two-thirds of the 19th century was the use of British power to suppress slavery either indirectly through influence – as in the case of the Ottoman empire in 1847 – or through direct rule (it was no coincidence that the establishment of slavery in Zanzibar in 1897, for example, followed shortly after the installation of Britain’s preferred choice of Sultan as ruler of Zanzibar under the guns of the Royal Navy). By the mid 20th century, when decolonization started in earnest, slavery had been all but eradicated globally, usually at the insistence of the colonial powers. Gilley’s claim is factually correct, Khan’s is ridiculous.

Similarly, Robinson is guilty of misrepresentation of the content of Gilley’s paper. At one point he claims: Gilley cites the fact that “since gaining independence, Congo has never had at its disposal an army comparable in efficiency and discipline” to that it had under the Belgians, commenting that “Maybe the Belgians should come back.” And then goes on to argue that Gilley clearly distorts history, given the appalling brutality of Belgian rule in the Congo (brutality which no one credibly disputes and which, even by the standards of the era was shocking).

Well, no. To understand the context for Gilley’s comment, you have to read the whole paper. At an earlier point, he cites the following conversation between a western writer and a young Congolese man. As one young man on the streets of Kinshasa asked Van Reybrouck (as described in his seminal 2010 book on the Congo): ‘How long is this independence of ours going to last anyway? When are the Belgians coming back?’

This story clearly informs the quote cited by Robinson. Gilley, his audience and, one presumes, the young man in Kinshasa are aware of the brutality of Belgian colonial rule – that the young man in Kinshasa wonders when the Belgians are coming back doesn’t display an ignorance of the reality of Belgian colonial rule, rather it is a rather stark commentary on the comparative quality of post-colonial rule. This is Gilley’s point, it’s premised on an understanding that the Belgians were horrible rulers. Either Robinson didn’t read Gilley’s piece thoroughly and missed this (obvious) connection, or he is intentionally misrepresenting what Gilley is saying – neither is acceptable.

The reaction to Gilley’s piece is telling, and rather confirms at least one of Gilley’s hypothesis. After reading the foregoing responses, does anyone think they do anything other than validate Gilley’s claim that existing scholarship – reflected in the commentary by existing scholars – provides a distorted and politically

motivated assessment of the merits (or lack thereof) of colonialism? This is what passes for academia these days?

A friend of mine once told me a story about a paper he presented, as grad student, which criticized a hypothesis advanced by Gary Becker – the Nobel Prize winning economist. After the presentation, Becker came up to him and said “I don’t think you’re right and that I’m wrong, but I’m willing to consider the possibility that I might be wrong”. THAT is the platonic ideal of the scholarly mind, the willingness to consider that establish truths might be wrong, no matter how unlikely it seems.

Here we have academics responding to a controversial – and certainly contestable – claim, not by substantively refuting Gilley’s specific claims, or addressing what he says, but with ad hominem attacks (“Trump tweet”, “Holocaust denial”), selective quotation, or simple misrepresentation of historical facts. Even the possibility that Gilley might be right, that his argument might have merit, is beyond the pale. Why engage with a controversial thesis when you can attack the author.

The comparison with Holocaust denial is particularly insidious, and seems to be a favoured tactic in academic circles for uncritically dismissing controversial views – disagree with my ideological worldview, you’re an ignorant Nazi who denies the truth. There is no better way to suppress and deter academic discussion and controversy than to deny even the possibility of being wrong, to declare that contesting views are beyond the realm of contestable discourse and to brand dissidents with the taint of history’s worst monsters. Let us be clear here, Holocaust deniers claim that something that did happen, didn’t happen. No fair-minded person can read Gilley’s piece as denying the occurrence of factual historical events. That Gilley’s critics make that comparison, raises – or rather, validates – concerns about how fair minded the groves of academe really are.