

# Empires have done good and we must feel free to say so

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THE  TIMES



December 5, 2017

Professor Bruce Gilley has triggered a sudden outbreak of contagious apoplexy among historians. In an article for the academic journal *Third World Quarterly* he had the temerity to suggest that “colonialism” was not without virtue, by which he means that there were countries that benefited from imperial government, and more outrageous still, that many would be better off if it was somehow restored in today’s failed states, such as Sudan.

Fellow scholars have exploded in fury, anathematised his views and some madcaps even sent death threats to the journal’s editor before the piece was withdrawn. Calmer spirits responded that to snuff out Professor Gilley’s opinions was a betrayal of academic freedom.

As the antagonists lock horns, the complex question as to whether the formerly dominant overseas empires improved the lot of their millions of subjects has disappeared from view. It is much easier to stick to the current academic orthodoxy which insists that empires were per se “bad things”. And there would be some sense in this: ask the Chinese subjects of the Japanese empire or the Ethiopians who spent a few years under Mussolini’s rule.

Empires were not all driven by the same values. The British and French boasted a moral reciprocity by which submission was rewarded with civil peace and the chance to share the benefits of the European enlightenment. Their empires were sustained by local collaborators who manned administrations. More importantly, there were large numbers of imperial subjects who welcomed what their rulers offered. A blind man whose sight was restored by a French surgeon in Morocco would have been puzzled by the current furore. Anarchy has never accelerated human progress and empires did bring stability to regions that had hitherto lacked them.

Defenders of empires are constantly challenged by those who insist that the price was too high in terms of the suffering created by wars of imperial conquest and the suppression of resistance. History is thus reduced to a crude balance sheet in which the opening of teaching hospitals in India is set against the Amritsar massacre.

Two fundamental tasks of the historian are to explain why people behaved in the ways they did and what they hoped to accomplish. These investigations are hindered by catcalls and demands to smother opinions (and conclusions) which do not fit contemporary political dogma. Retrospective moral posturing places history in a straitjacket and skews our understanding of the past.

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