

NATIONAL REVIEW

An Outspoken Scholar Gets Canceled, Again, but He's Not Giving Up

Under activist pressure, Bruce Gilley's publisher quashes his new book at the last minute. He and peers across academe rise to his defense.

By CHRIS KENDALL

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Cancel culture in higher education follows a predictable pattern.

First comes the offense. A professor assigns a book written by an author who has fallen afoul of postmodern moral sensibilities, or encourages a class discussion on a topic deemed "settled" by the arbiters of today's culture.

After that come the demands. "Fire him," "revoke his tenure," "cancel his assigned classes," and so on.

Then come the platitudes from administrators. "This does not represent the values of our college."

And so it goes. The cycle is so predictable now that its inanity ought to be obvious to all, but college students and the professors and administrators who enable them seem to proclaim each ever more trivial offense an ever greater threat.

For some scholars, the cycle is uncomfortably familiar.

Bruce Gilley, professor of political science at Portland State University, faced the cancel-culture mob back in 2017, when a piece he wrote, for the journal *Third World Quarterly*, on the benefits of colonialism was met with death threats and calls for his firing. The National Association of Scholars promptly published the essay on its website.

Ultimately, Gilley weathered that storm, but another is brewing.

Lexington Books, the academic imprint of Rowman and Littlefield, has canceled Gilley's forthcoming book, *The Last Imperialist: Sir Alan Burns' Epic Defense of the British Empire*, a mere two weeks before it was due to be released. This work was to be the flagship piece of a new series, "Problems of Anti-Colonialism," of which Gilley was to be the co-editor.

What caused Lexington Books' change of heart? An online petition created by Joshua Moufawad-Paul, a philosophy professor at Toronto's York University, took exception to the series and to Gilley's book. This petition launched on Saturday, September 26, and by Monday the series, and the book, had disappeared from Lexington's website. Moreover, those who had preordered the book on Amazon received notices that it would be delayed. As of this writing, the petition has garnered just over 800 signatures.

Gilley requested an explanation from Lexington Books and Rowman and Littlefield but was met with radio silence. Said Gilley, "In the absence of information, I'm assuming this is a cancellation."

Later, he confirmed that Lexington Books had released him from his contract and offered no justification — simply a "formal notice of [their] intent to cancel the series."

In the petition, Moufawad-Paul called Gilley's work "poorly researched," "shoddy," and "based on a misrepresentation of source material and egregious historical revisionism." For evidence, Moufawad-Paul offers the 2017 controversy, which he characterizes thus:

"Gilley expressed his poorly researched thoughts on colonialism and anti-colonialism in a paper that was retracted from *Third World Quarterly*. The retraction was based on the fact that it had been published without peer review and simply in the interest of debate."

Later, Moufawad-Paul writes, "his only published work in this area was retracted because it did not meet academic standards, because he misrepresented and misunderstood the work to which he was referring."

At best, Moufawad-Paul's claims demonstrate unfamiliarity with the 2017 controversy and the parroting of demonstrably false assertions. At worst, they betray willful misrepresentation and spiteful vitriol. Even the most cursory review of the controversy reveals that the paper went through a double-blind peer review and that it was withdrawn only after the editors and Gilley received "serious and credible threats of personal violence."

But Moufawad-Paul's mischaracterizations continue. Of the new project, he demands nothing short of complete cancellation. From the petition:

We are calling on Rowman and Littlefield to terminate Gilley's series because Gilley not only fails to meet the standards of scholarship in the area his series is purportedly about,

but because he endorses a white nationalist perspective that is opposed to historical research itself. It is difficult to believe that the volumes in this series will accomplish anything more than lend academic credibility to paternalist and eurocentric revisionism and neo-colonial and settler-colonial propaganda and policy.

Let's take his claims one at a time.

Claim 1: Gilley's series "fails to meet the standards of scholarship in the area."

The now canceled book from Gilley represents over five years of rigorous, original scholarship that has been peer-reviewed and lauded by giants in the field of colonial history, perhaps most notably Jeremy Black and Tirthankar Roy. Black, a professor emeritus at the University of Exeter, is arguably the greatest living historian of modern Britain. Roy is a professor of economic history at the London School of Economics. He is one of the preeminent economic historians of the day and widely considered one of the best contemporary historians of India. Apparently, this is not high enough praise for Moufawad-Paul.

Claim 2: Gilley's series "endorses a white nationalist perspective."

Gilley's book, and the broader series, has received plaudits from scholars in Pakistan, Angola, Kenya, and numerous other countries across Africa and the Middle East. To cry "white supremacy" speaks more to the inadequacy of the critique, a resort to fear-mongering rather than a serious challenge to the actual arguments being put forward by Gilley. This is symptomatic of a much bigger problem — a snowballing social movement of terrorization of unapproved discussions. To assert that a line of scholarship supports "white nationalism" is to immediately push it outside the Overton window.

Claim 3: Gilley's series will "lend academic credibility to paternalist and eurocentric revisionism."

If Moufawad-Paul means to say that Gilley in his work makes Europe and European perspectives his primary focus, he is sorely mistaken. "The [book] series was planned as a place for critical responses to the anticolonial and 'decolonizing' intellectual projects that have become pervasive in global politics," Gilley writes in the Wall Street Journal, giving an excellent look behind the scenes of this latest episode in the cancel-culture wars. "My co-editor and I had received an eager response from young scholars in Africa and South Asia, where the elder generation's anticolonialism was long since worn thin. Radicals in the West disagree."

Gilley follows the work of scholars in the regions about whose history he writes, whereas Moufawad-Paul parrots postmodern critiques developed in the post-Enlightenment West. Only one of these can be said to be "Eurocentric."

Moufawad-Paul's petition is merely the latest in an ever-increasing trend toward the suppression of legitimate, dissenting views in the academy through the coordination of mob-delivered "justice" that takes the suspiciously convenient form of whatever the complainant believes to be right. Academia has functioned on this principle, or one quite similar, for some time, though recently the attacks have taken on a brazenness and ferocity unknown in prior years.

What can be done? Gilley has learned to take a measured approach. "Part of my lesson from the last time is that the backlash comes slowly but powerfully. My mistake last time was that I panicked and issued a retraction. I'm not going to do that this time."

The National Association of Scholars has published a counter-petition to defend Gilley. If you believe in the value of academic freedom, if you believe that scholars should be able to dissent from orthodox views in the academy, then I urge you to sign our petition in support of Gilley.

Cancel culture has, till now, followed a predictable pattern. Perhaps this time we can break that cycle.

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