

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Cancel Mob Comes Back for More
'Anticolonial' ideologues bully another publisher into nixing one of
my research projects.

By Bruce Gilley
Oct. 7, 2020

For the second time in my academic career, I have been canceled. Last week Lexington Books, the academic imprint of the publisher Rowman & Littlefield, decided not to publish my forthcoming biography of a late colonial official, "The Last Imperialist: Sir Alan Burns' Epic Defense of the British Empire." It came a mere two weeks before the book was due to ship. At the same time, Lexington Books canceled the new book series, "Problems of Anti-Colonialism," of which my book was to be the first installment.



The cancellations began Sept. 26 with a petition that snowballed on social media. It was started by Joshua Moufawad-Paul, an avowed Maoist philosopher in Toronto whose blog is titled "Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Mayhem!" and books include "The Communist Necessity." By Sept. 28 all mention of my book had been air-brushed from the publisher's site without a word to me. For two days, I sought explanation and received only silence. I requested they return to me the rights to the book, which they quickly did. Lexington then canceled the book series without explanation.

This erasure is very similar to my first, in 2017, when the publisher Taylor & Francis withdrew my peer-reviewed article "The Case for Colonialism" from the journal Third World Quarterly. The journal's editor had received "serious and credible threats of personal violence" following a global petition campaign led by Farhana Sultana of Syracuse University (who also tried to get Princeton to revoke my doctorate). I consented to the withdrawal in the interest of the safety of the editorial staff.

"The Last Imperialist" is the culmination of five years of intensive primary source research into the life of Burns, who was governor of the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and a prominent critic of rapid decolonization while serving at the United Nations after World War II. The book passed peer review with Lexington Books last December, and it carried

endorsements from two giants in the field of colonial history, Jeremy Black and Tirthankar Roy. The book was already being sold to distributors and stores.

The series, “Problems of Anti-Colonialism,” of which I was a co-editor, had also gone through a peer-review process. The series was planned as a forum for critical responses to the anticolonial and “decolonizing” intellectual projects that have become pervasive in global politics (and maybe in your workplace). My co-editor and I had received an eager response from young scholars in Africa and South Asia, where the elder generation’s anticolonialism has long since worn thin.

Radicals in the West disagree. Their petition stated that the series would promote “white nationalism.” Yours truly had shown “a pig-headed refusal to deal with the rigorous historical analyses.” The publisher should “terminate” the series because it would “lend academic credibility to paternalist and eurocentric revisionism and neo-colonial and settler-colonial propaganda and policy.”

After I posted news of the cancellations, Mr. Moufawad-Paul crowed about the success: “Rowman and Littlefield paid attention to the academic community and Gilley’s shameful series has been rejected.” The petition had gathered 800 signatures by the time the publisher caved in, far fewer than the more than 18,000 it took to bring down my journal article. I have yet to hear any explanation from Rowman & Littlefield, which flourishes under American freedoms.

Part of me takes a ghoulish satisfaction in this latest fiasco for free speech and academic freedom. From a purely self-interested perspective, this sort of publicity is hard to buy. The Talibanning of “The Case for Colonialism” brought much attention to the article. It was reprinted in *Academic Questions*, house journal of the National Association of Scholars (whose board I have since joined) and has been widely cited. I have no doubt that “The Last Imperialist” and our book series will find new and better homes.

Another benefit: Watching this latest boxcar roll by in the sorry train of cancel culture may finally convince my center-left friends that the situation is dire. In recent years, many well-meaning bipartisan initiatives, like Heterodox Academy, have been launched to try to reinvigorate political diversity in the academy and more broadly in elite culture. But these are Enlightenment solutions to a totalitarian problem. Appeals to democratic principles won’t move those who believe, like Lenin, that liberal fair play is a tool of oppression.

I attribute the ease and suddenness of my latest cancellation to this year’s Black Lives Matter moral panic. It has taken cultural totalitarianism to new levels, challenging the U.S. ethic of freedom—one reason I am running a free reading group for college students on critiques of the movement. The putrefaction of the university, and of elite American and European culture more generally, has made the task of rebuilding liberal institutions an urgent one. Gentlemanly appeals to open-minded debate are no longer enough. Concrete steps must be taken in law and university policy. For instance, federal funds should be

withheld from colleges that force students to learn grievance studies and maintain offices of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Which brings us back to the book series. Its justification was that today's anticolonial, postcolonial and "decolonizing" narratives have become assaults on the foundations of the Enlightenment. They have dominated academia for mostly bad reasons, and they have now spread beyond the ivory tower to become agents of chaos and cultural change in society at large.

The mob's takedown of the series shows its importance. The stage actors have appeared right on cue in this dramatization of what "decolonizing" means for free speech. Whatever the fate of our book series, freedom is needed more urgently than ever.

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