

NEWSLETTER, PSU-AAUP, HIGHER ED FACULTY

PSU-AAUP Condemns Professor Bruce Gilley's "procolonialism" Platform

MARCH 11, 2021 / PSU-AAUP

Over the past several years PSU-AAUP has been working hard to define its values and represent all members. We created and facilitated affinity caucuses in order to understand the needs of and strengthen our work on behalf of BIPOC folks, caregivers, LGBTQIA+ folks, and women. We have continued engagement in **equity** work. Moreover, in this vein we have worked diligently to combat **abuses of academic freedom**, including but not limited to **bargaining with Administration regarding protections for academic freedom**, hosting numerous **discussions regarding academic freedom**, and **filing a Division A grievance** on behalf of members experiencing or with the potential to experience harassment for their own appropriate expressions of academic freedom.

In December of 2020 PSU-AAUP Executive Council voted overwhelmingly to endorse the following statement: a condemnation of PSU Political Science Professor Bruce Gilley's "procolonialism" platform. PSU-AAUP stands for academic freedom. PSU-AAUP does not stand for hostile work environments created under the guise of academic freedom. PSU-AAUP strongly condemns Professor Gilley's platform, and any other abuse of academic freedom used to harass, intimidate, and harm others.

After the January 6th insurgency on the nation's capitol, in light of the **PSU Faculty Senate's resolution on Academic Freedom**, President Percy and Provost Jeffords's email statement on March 2nd, and the escalation of irresponsible speech by Professor Gilley and others who wish to mislead the general public by declaring that faculty who work on racial or social justice are the "new racists," we believe our statement to be more necessary now than ever.

Communications regarding this statement should be sent to aaup@psuaaup.net.

PSU-AAUP EXECUTIVE COUNCIL Statement Condemning "procolonialism"

PSU-AAUP Executive Committee condemns Professor Bruce Gilley's platform of "procolonialism."

We issue this statement in solidarity with our members who concur that procolonialism is a profoundly misguided research agenda and that it generates a hostile environment for the members of the university community, both workers and students. Moreover, while we believe strongly in

academic freedom, we assert that academic freedom cannot be understood as equivalent to free speech. Academic freedom protects work that contributes to the common good—in the twenty-first century, we consider the common good to be a functioning democracy that serves the diverse population of the United States of America.

1. Background

In 2017, Professor Gilley submitted “The Case for Colonialism” to the journal *Third World Quarterly*. After a selective and cursory discussion of an enormously complex and bloody history, he used a cost-benefit analysis to conclude that the benefits of colonialism outweighed its drawbacks. “Maybe the Belgians should come back,” he wrote, referring to the period best-known for a brutality that led to ten million deaths. The article prompted the resignation of fifteen scholars on the editorial board in protest. It also prompted two petitions for retraction signed by around 18,000 scholars.

Since that time, Gilley has delivered a talk to Germany’s far-right political party exhorting the audience to take pride in its colonial past; brought his patently inappropriate and inhuman cost-benefit frame to the history of American slavery, claiming that it was “good fortune” for African people to be enslaved by the British Empire; and responded to the nation’s reckoning with racism after George Floyd’s murder by branding his social media with #BLMterrorists. In 2019, he launched a book series with Lexington Books entitled “Problems with Anti-colonialism.” He intended it as a counter “to anti-colonial attitudes [that] continue to constrain policy choices in the former colonial world” and as support for “former colonial powers (mainly Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and Italy) as well as Anglo-settlement colonies (the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand)” that experience pressure to “debase their historical records.”

This fall, a petition on Change.org, “Against Bruce Gilley’s Colonial Apologetics,” that questioned the publisher’s judgement in approving the aforementioned series amassed over 900 signatures of scholars and educators across the country in a matter of days. It is important to note that these signatures were not generated by an outreach to a general public largely unfamiliar with the context but to scholars and educators well-informed about Gilley’s positions. Presumably in response to the petition, and accompanying letters demonstrating the faulty grounds for the series, the publisher reconsidered the academic merit of the project and cancelled the series. Whatever reason the publisher may officially give, PSU-AAUP views the cancellation as a vindication of the principle of academic freedom.

2. Neocolonialism is a Misguided Research Agenda

PSU-AAUP is not in the business of evaluating faculty research agendas, and we do not think it is useful for us to provide an in-depth evaluation of Prof. Gilley’s research here. We also note that we do not have the power to cancel or censor Gilley; we are neither a promotion and tenure committee nor an editorial board. However, as a community of academics, we would be remiss to not acknowledge the overwhelming consensus among our colleagues who are experts in history and political science that Gilley’s research is not merely unpopular but rather discredited. As an organization of the university community, then, we do see it as part of our duty to the profession

and the public to censure Professor Gilley. Censuring has long played an important role in influencing discussions that concern matters of the common good, especially during periods in which norms are shifting.

3. Neocolonialism Creates a Hostile Environment for Members of the University Community

As a community of faculty and academic professionals, we have a moral duty to actively contribute to building an environment in which all of our students can thrive. As a union representing academic workers, we also have a duty to protect the work environment of our members.

By calling for the recolonization of predominantly Black and Brown countries and denying people their ability and right to self-determination, Prof. Gilley's research and teaching undermines our own university community by contradicting Portland State's stated goal to "make everyone feel welcome, included, and respected." Whatever his own moral philosophy and commitments, his work has the effect of providing intellectual cover for racism and white nationalism.

4. Academic Freedom is not Free Speech

Academic freedom is not the same thing as free speech. The latter refers to a series of rules restraining government censorship of individual expression. When exercising our right to free speech, we have the freedom to be grossly wrong or grossly unjust (though there are a variety of speech and expressive acts which are in fact prohibited). With academic freedom, we do not. When academic institutions and reputable publishers do not uphold the standards designed to safeguard the integrity of research and interpretation, academic freedom loses its salience to democracy. Democratic deliberations require institutions that work to distinguish reasoned positions from unreasonable ones, and the university and reputable presses are some of the very institutions where this must happen. To safeguard democracy, we must protect academic freedom by distinguishing between speech that deserves to use the university as a platform for its dissemination and speech that does not. Though Bruce Gilley's procolonialism may be protected by the First Amendment, we believe it does not deserve the protection of academic freedom.