

Why a provocative academic is challenging orthodoxies about the evils of empire

By Ben Macintyre

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Bruce Gilley is probably the academic most likely to be no-platformed in Britain, a man whose views are so controversial that many people believe that he should not be allowed to express them.



That is quite an achievement for a soft-spoken Canadian former journalist and historian at Portland State University in Oregon.

Professor Gilley's sin, in the eyes of many, is to say the unsayable, very loudly: to praise colonialism in general, and the British Empire in particular. Last year, in an article entitled *The case for colonialism in the journal Third World Quarterly*, Professor Gilley argued that "western colonialism was, as a general rule, both objectively beneficial and subjectively legitimate in most of the places where it was found".

That highly contentious argument ignited a predictable firestorm, as intended. Some eight million people logged on to the journal's website. The editor received "serious and credible threats of personal violence". Fifteen members of the journal's board resigned and the article was eventually withdrawn, though it was not retracted. Two petitions, condemning Professor Gilley's views, demanding an apology and insisting the article be scrapped, attracted 16,000 signatures. He was accused, variously, of promoting "white supremacy", "shoddy scholarship", and writing "drivel".

When Nigel Biggar, regius professor of theology at Oxford, offered a supportive line of argument in the pages of *The Times*, he too was attacked. One Cambridge lecturer accused him of "outright racist imperial apologetics".

Far from being abashed by the bashing he has received, Professor Gilley exudes the swagger of a man thoroughly enjoying his role as academic *bête noire*. "I grew up in Calgary, a prairie city, a no-bullshit sort of place," he says. Lean and rangy, the 51-year-old, jeans-wearing professor has something of the cowboy about him. He certainly comes out with all guns blazing.

"We are utterly suffused with the anti-colonial orthodoxy," he says, as we settle into the coffee bar of his Kensington hotel. "It has become such a default assumption that people are not even aware that it is possible to have another view. This is what hegemony is . . . It's not open to debate: it's the great and glorious and correct anti-colonial viewpoint."

Professor Gilley's challenge to that viewpoint is direct, uncompromising, deliberately provocative, and certainly debatable. Colonialism was not a blanket force for evil, he argues, but frequently beneficial, providing opportunities for peace, prosperity, political progress, economic infrastructure and intellectual development — what he calls the "colonial contribution to human flourishing".

To understand the meaning of empire, he insists, requires an exercise in “what if” history: imagining what might have happened if the colonial powers had never existed, based on what came before (not good), and what followed decolonisation (often worse). He points out that in many parts of the world indigenous people migrated towards colonised areas because of the benefits conferred by imperial rule. Perhaps most controversially of all, he has argued that weak and failed states could usefully relearn and rediscover the ways of colonial rule in partnership with the West, a stance that comes close to calling for recolonisation.

To his many detractors, this is coded racism, an attempt to reassume the white man’s burden that sidesteps the scale of human suffering under imperialism, the racial prejudice that suffused it, and the economic exploitation that was its primary purpose. Professor Gilley is insistent: “The amount of coercion in most colonial states was infinitesimal.”

Anti-colonial historians of empire (i.e. most of them) not only disagree with that; much more worryingly, many simply do not want to hear it. The petitions demanding that the article be removed included the signatures of hundreds of academics at universities in western countries whose charters protect academic freedom and promote debate.

Even so, Professor Gilley understands the decision to take down his article in *Third World Quarterly*. “They were getting death threats from fanatics. These people know it’s easy to strike fear into someone’s heart. It’s one thing to defend free speech, but these journals don’t have the capacity to withstand the backlash: protests, being inundated with emails, lawsuits for supposedly promoting Nazism.”

Over the past week in London, the professor has attended a private Oxford student seminar and taken part in a panel discussion, but he has avoided a shootout on a public platform. “If I gave a public talk to a student group entitled *The case for colonialism*, the result would have been a shitstorm, and it would have served no purpose. But it would have shown the extent to which in Britain, of all places, people have stopped thinking about this most central of issues in British history and identity.”

Professor Gilley’s path from western Canada to international defender of colonialism has been a circuitous one. After graduating from the University of Toronto and postgraduate work in economics at Oxford and Princeton, he worked for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in Hong Kong, arriving in the city in 1992 on the same day as Chris Patten, the last governor, who would transfer sovereignty to China five years later.

“That was really the key. I witnessed the great drama of the end of one of the greatest colonies, and the serious debates on world history that were thrown up by the handover of Hong Kong to China profoundly affected me: to see a colony that has been so successful, and created so many good lives that would otherwise not have existed, struggling to retain its colonial identity. It was the most pro-colonial decolonisation ever.”

The other key turning point came in 2012, when he read *There Was a Country*, the last book published by the great Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. For the previous half-century, Achebe had been held up as an anti-colonial figure, but Professor Gilley found himself transfixed by one passage. “Here is a piece of heresy,” wrote Achebe. “The British governed their colony of Nigeria with considerable care. There was a very highly competent cadre of government officials imbued with a high level of knowledge of how to run a country. This was not something that the British achieved only in Nigeria; they were able to manage this on a bigger scale in India and Australia. The British had the experience of governing and doing it competently. I

am not justifying colonialism. But it is important to face the fact that British colonies were, more or less, expertly run.”

That reflection had a profound impact. “I thought jeez, I wonder when the tide turned on colonialism? When did it become a dirty word?”

By 2010 he was a tenured professor at Portland and increasingly confident in his opinions. “If you’re not left wing in academia, you’re in a very hostile work environment and at a certain point you have a choice — either exit the business because you’re a pariah, or you decide not to give a shit anymore and just offend away, be yourself come what may. That’s where I got to. I was going to write what I thought was true.” The extreme reaction to that writing convinced him he was doing the right thing. “It was not just censorious; the language was actually violent. I said to my wife: ‘This changes everything . . . because these thugs are now shown for being what they are.’ ”

A former journalist with an eye for a headline, Professor Gilley knows that pugnacity makes good copy. He is given to sweeping statements calculated to make the blood of “anti-colonial fanatics” boil. “Africa’s a mess because Africa would have been a mess anyway . . .” On a poll showing that 40 per cent of Britons view the colonial era in a favourable light, he says: “It should be much more.”

The debate over colonialism is so polarised that it has long ceased to be a matter of a glass half full or half empty, but a glass either overflowing or completely void. “I’d love it if the colonial past was seen as a complex moment of human encounter with tragedy and triumph, and good and bad, like all history, with lessons both positive and negative,” he says.

Yet he does not long entertain evidence that does not fit his belief in the essential beneficence of empire. What of the Tasmanian genocide, in which the aboriginal population was wiped out by colonists with British government connivance? “I don’t know anything about Tasmania but every time I look at one of these allegedly uncontested evils of colonialism, I find a more complex story.” He then changes the subject to the Bengal famine, and why the British empire was not responsible.

This is history by accentuating the positive, and if not eliminating, then certainly minimising, the negative. The attempt to attach a moral accounting to empire is, in many ways, anachronistic. Rather than look back with shame or pride, historians should treat it as a multifaceted, uneven phenomenon, different in different places and at different times, sometimes beneficial for the colonised but also profoundly unequal, racist, exploitative, and capable of generating human misery on a terrible scale. The argument that the strong and technologically advanced have colonised the weak at other times in history is no justification in the 21st century.

This unlikely North American academic is the lightning rod for two very different debates that should be seen as entirely distinct. One is about the history of empire and the other is about freedom of speech; the former is open to different interpretations, the latter is not. One does not need to agree with what Professor Gilley says to defend his right to say it.

BRUCE GILLEY

Born July 21, 1966

Education: BA in economics and international relations from the University of Toronto in 1988, master of philosophy in economics from the University of Oxford in 1991 and PhD in politics from Princeton University in 2007.

Career: Started working for the business magazine Far Eastern Economic Review in 1992. Authored four university-press books, including China's Democratic Future in 2004 and The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy in 2009. In 2011, he became a tenured professor at Portland State University and is now a professor of political science there. He is also on the editorial boards of the Journal of Democracy and the Journal of Contemporary China.

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Ian Wilson: He makes some very obviously true points about the benefits of colonialism, which you have to be blind not to acknowledge. The pity is that he has to be polarised, to some extent, to defend his views. Dominant human tribes have been colonisers from the year dot. If it wasn't the Brits in India and Australia, it would have been the French or the Dutch or the Chinese. The most obvious example of the abject cruelty and the extreme benefits of colonialism is Australia. A stone age continent to a thriving first world country in 200 years, but many aboriginal people suffered grievously and some still suffer. However, many aboriginal Australians live great and glorious modern lives, which would not have come about without the colonisation of Australia. History is complex and there are no easy answers or solutions.

Graham Bell: Professor Gilley, I admire your stand on the benefits of Colonialism. It's very easy for the left leaning virtuous mob who have never been into any ex colonial country to stand on their soap boxes and snarl at all the past evils of which there undoubtedly were many, but to over look all the benefits that the law and order of colonial leadership brought. However in today's world you are unfortunately a voice in the wilderness and very non PC. So true "Africa's a mess because Africa would have been a mess anyway . . ."

Julius St.Swithin: I have travelled a lot in my career and found that people from formerly colonised countries have nuanced and not wholly negative views of colonialism. A Bangladeshi UN official volunteered that the UK had done a lot to advance his country. An Indonesian government official, comparing his county with Malaysia, wished that they too been colonised by the British. In two cities in the USA, taxis drivers of Nigerian origin on learning that I was British and had been to their former country independently said the best future for their country would be for the British to return. Professor Gilley is doing history a valuable service.

M Reynolds: Bruce Gilley has added to a very interesting debate, the sad fact is that some people can't and won't debate but threaten violence and spout vitriol at those that don't agree with them. I hope he, and those associated with him, remain safe.

Maya Patel: What a brave man Professor Gilley is telling it like it was and is. Show me one monument or building of any significance that was there in Sub Saharan Africa before the Colonial powers arrived. Instead of celebrating the wonderful infrastructure, rule of law, civil service, railways, etc. left behind by the British, Africans cry Colonialism to justify their own failures. By the same token go to most parts of India and you will see an appreciation of the Raj. Just go to Kolkata and you will see the magnificent Victoria Memorial Building with a massive statue of Queen Victoria still standing in its gardens.

G Agrawal: The trouble with extremism (in any form) is that often the person doesn't tolerate any view without consideration or debate. Instead vitriol, indignation and abuse takes precedent and prevents social development and progression. The mob mentality takes over with the lefty PC group but they often confuse imperialism with racism, the two are quite different. Britain divided & conquered then integrated the locals into their governance, society so they then could rule with better control. It's how this little Island became the largest Empire of it's kind. Whereas the Spanish would simply plunder and give syphilis in return, much more worse. I find trouble that this piece says many people wouldn't say Empire is good and this man shouldn't be allowed to express his views (that is non-hatred). Without the Empire, fascism would have won World War 2 and it would be a much more different place today with less freedom, liberty and diversity (slightly ironic given the proposal of colonialism promoting Nazism written in lawsuits). Good to see the Professor fighting against the tide and continually expressing his views for debate with logic and reason.

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