
WHAT'S AT STAKE IN THE DEBATE ON COLONIALISM?

Remarks by Dr. Bruce Gilley at “The Debate on Empire”, *Times*
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Introduction

I want to thank the *Times* for holding this event, and to thank Dr's Roy and Masani for participating. But most of all, I want to express my appreciation of Professor Biggar's moral and professional courage in helping to organize events and research projects such as this. We had a wonderful seminar at Oxford yesterday. And I hope we can hold other events such as this tonight because there is more at stake in the debate on the British empire, and on European colonialism more generally, than you may realize. I am going to mention 5 ways that this debate matters.

Objective Costs/Benefits

The immediate question is historical. Was European colonialism, including British colonialism, basically a good thing or a bad thing? Yesterday at Oxford, I released the first version of a 22-page summary of research whose findings show that colonialism had positive benefits on human lives. I produced this to show that, in my mind, the quality scientific research leans heavily in favor of a positive contribution in most cases. So what is important, what is at stake here, is simply this: the assertion by contemporary anti-colonial voices that there is “no debate” on the effects of colonialism – that the evidence is all of negative consequences – is simply false. This matters for several reasons: first, many hard-working, well-intentioned, and humane people worked for the colonial civil service and I am glad to acknowledge the presence tonight of David LeBreton and Charles Cullimore, the last two chairs of the Overseas Service Pensioners Association, the successor to Her Majesty's Overseas Civil Service. This was Britain's greatest generation and just because they are not a powerful lobby today does not mean that the truth of their work can be smeared. Also, as I will come back to, the objective record matters because it holds lessons for fixing today's weak and failed states.

Subjective Legitimacy

There is another way of approaching the historical question, one which I think has been largely overlooked by anti-colonial critics because it makes them uncomfortable. Instead of making judgements ourselves, what if instead we look at how colonial peoples responded to colonial rule? Again, anti-colonial voices will insist: there is no debate. Colonial peoples resisted tooth and nail from start to finish. Yet when we do the empirics, we find quite the opposite. Not only did elites usually solicit and welcome colonial rule as far preferable to the alternatives, but their populations streamed into colonial centers, worked diligently for colonial governments, and did everything possible (if they could not like the *Windrush* generation migrate to colonial metropolises), to educate and integrate their children in colonial institutions. Colonialism was mostly legitimate for most of the time. And it became illegitimate not because of “resistance” but because exhausted colonial powers decided to go home.

For instance, you will read many books about the so-called anti-colonial rebellion of John Chilembwe in 1915 in then-Nyasaland. But this rebellion was a flop. Chilembwe sat on an old railroad bridge awaiting a mass uprising that never happened. He fled and was caught by native police and the 100 people who took part were arrested. Meanwhile, about 215,000 Nyasaland men, two thirds of the adult population, were fighting for British forces in World War I. Which group, the 100 or the 215,000, represents the attitudes of those people towards British colonialism? You get the point. Why does this matter? Again, one reason is historical: we trample on the complex moral choices and memories of colonized peoples when we insist that if they were not “noble” resisters then they have no place in history. A Malaysian woman and a Nigerian woman both have written essays in response to my article saying as much about their forebears, which you can find on my website. Secondly, understanding how colonial regimes became legitimate holds useful lessons for today.

Liberal Society and Debate

This leads me to a third reason why this debate matters. It matters because reasoned and civilized debate is at the heart of a liberal society. You may know that my article “The Case for Colonialism” was withdrawn because of death threats

to the editorial team of the *Third World Quarterly*. The thousands of academics and critics who signed petitions to force the journal to retract the article pretended they had nothing to do with it. But they had everything to do with it. Not only did they raise the idea of censorship as an appropriate response to views they disagreed with, but the violence of their language directly fed into threats of actual violence. One University College London lecturer wrote that my article – which is the most widely-read article in the *Third World Quarterly*'s history and has found its way onto hundreds of graduate and undergraduate syllabi – “would have received a very poor, if not a failing, grade” in her course. Such topics, she wrote, need to be “adequately monitored” by academics like herself.

What does this tell us about the state of liberal society and its ability to engage in difficult debates, to listen to opposing viewpoints, and to trust that an open society deals with difference better than a closed one? As a leading medical researcher of South Asian descent in the U.S. wrote to me during my controversy: “This is frightening if you think of the structure of scientific revolutions. What does this indicate for new theories, new knowledge, new ideas?”

Perhaps she puts her finger on the key point: postmodern professors and increasingly society itself is not interested in “scientific revolutions”, doesn't really believe in objective truths at all. So we get this bait and switch going on: start talking seriously about research designs and variable measurements and suddenly the critics shout: “Stop boring me with your facts. This is about attitude!”

Do you notice the Maoist overtones? Decolonizing knowledge and institutions has become retrograde and anti-scientific, not an attempt to build shared understanding but to hold knowledge hostage to political currents. In her widely read book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, the Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues for a “strong anti-positivistic stance” that rejects “Western science and knowledge.” So what are these alternatives? Well, only people like Dr. Smith know and whether non-Maori can know or be involved depends on whether they have the right attitude as determined by, you guessed it, the vanguard neo-tribal elites like Dr. Smith. This is not research. This is Maoism dressed up in native costume. It is also the same anti-rationalism that has ravaged postcolonial societies for decades.

Fixing Failed States

This is the fourth, and perhaps most important, way that this debate matters. Who really loses when we foreclose the debate on colonialism, ignore the many ways that colonialism worked, and was legitimate, and give up liberal and scientific society? Are those Cambridge dons who celebrate the “liberation” from colonialism of places like Haiti, the Congo, and Namibia living without running water, with insurgencies, a lack of legal redress, tyrannical rulers? Once we remove the “colonialism bad” cataract from our eyesight, we have a much clearer idea of solutions to misgovernance in many contemporary Third World states.

Back to Nyasaland. The heirs of John Chilembwe finally won independence in 1964 under Hastings Banda and renamed the country Malawi. He ruled for 30 years. In 1960, when the British were preparing the country for independence, GDP per capita in PPP terms in today's prices was \$865. By 1994, when Banda left, it was \$863. Today, after a 25 year global boom in which the incomes per capita of many developing countries have doubled or tripled, it has crept up to about \$1,000. This is an anti-colonial catastrophe for the 19 million people of that country. But anti-colonial critics roll their eyes when you discuss such issues: can't we get back to the Kew archives with delicious details of colonial atrocities? Or they mumble something about the legacies of colonialism. If I was a mother in Malawi and my child was 7 times more likely to die before their first birthday than a child in the West, I would have some hard questions for today's anti-colonial forces.

Joyce Banda, the vice president with no relation, became president in 2012 after the sitting president died, and was promptly revealed to have overseen the largest corruption in the country's history -- \$800 million gone between 2009 and 2014 when she lost -- or the combined annual income of 5% of the entire population. She fled to the United States and then South Africa. Last week she returned and plans to run again next year. Aid has been suspended, but is it not time finally to state the obvious: independence has been a human tragedy for Malawi. If aid is resumed, it should be only with conditions: colonial governance meaning a lot of international partnerships; formal colonial sovereign power in some areas like public finance, elections, and policing; and a new charter city build near Blantyre, the former

colonial center in the southern highlands that is the birthplace of David Livingstone and the country's financial center.

The West and the Rest

Finally, there is more at stake here than just getting history right, the flourishing of the Western liberal tradition, and practical solutions for today's failed states. When the West loses confidence in itself because of a misplaced colonial guilt, other far worse forces are all-too-ready to fill in the global leadership gap. Venal regimes in Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran are all too ready to assert leadership, often repeating anti-colonial tropes alongside India, Brazil, and South Africa with Western intellectuals playing useful idiots on their official television stations. Triumphalism or historical amnesia about colonial wrongs are the wrong approach: the self-critical tradition is at the heart of the West and we must remain our own greatest critics. Still, when that criticism becomes unobjective, hateful, and debilitating the biggest losers are those in the world who desperately need an active and engaged West.

Conclusion

Well, I do agree with anti-colonial critics on one point. I too am appalled that 40% of the British people believe the empire did good and is something to be proud of. It should be much higher. "There has been far too much sackcloth and ashes, and I think it has done a great deal of harm." Those were the words of longtime colonial civil servant Sir Alan Burns speaking at Oxford in 1947. His words ring true today more than ever.

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