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Rhetoric, Comedy, or *Shock*?  
Bruce Gilley's Case of Anachronism

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In “The Case for Colonialism” published in *Third World Quarterly*, Bruce Gilley, professor of political science at Portland State University, maintains that anti-colonial ideology has afflicted subject peoples and prevented their “faithful encounter with modernity in many places”(1). He proposes that colonialism should be recovered by “reclaiming colonial modes of governance; by recolonizing some areas; and by creating new Western colonies from scratch” (1). The controversial paper which calls for the return of colonialism has been termed by many as “clickbait” (Colleen Flaherty). Petitions have been made to urge *The Third World Quarterly* to flunk the paper and now it has been withdrawn “because of threats of violence - sparking a storm of protest”( [Adam Lusher](#)). The withdrawal notice of the paper is worth noting: “the journal editor has subsequently received serious and credible threats of personal violence. These threats are linked to the publication of this essay. Taylor & Francis has a strong and supportive duty of care to all our academic editorial teams, and *this is why we are withdrawing this essay.*”[emphasis is mine]. The reason for withdrawing the paper is not Gilley’s “modest proposal”, but threats to the editorial team (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037>).

Throughout his article, Gilley reverts back to Enlightenment views on Progress to run his argument home in 2017. The idea of Progress is the cornerstone of the colonial discourse since it would provide “the justification for westerners to expand the geographical domain of modernity”(Norgaard, 1994, 52). Giley is moving along the same line when he claims:

The case for western colonialism is about rethinking the past as well as improving the future. It involves reaffirming the primacy of human lives, universal values, and shared responsibilities—the civilizing mission without scare quotes—that led to the improvements in living conditions for most Third World peoples during most episodes of Western colonialism. It also involves learning how to unlock those benefits again. Western and non-western countries should reclaim the colonial toolkit and language as part of their commitment to effective governance and international order. (1)

The discourse used to idealize the Idea of Progress finds an echo in Gilley’s article. Gilley claims to be concerned about human well-being—never explaining what he means by “human” and how he defines “well being”; he wants to unearth the fundamental law of historical development—homogenizing the causes of improvement in the living conditions of what he terms “third world peoples”; and he supports universal values encompassing all humanity regardless of time and place. He is taking too much for granted when it comes to “universal values”, “shared responsibilities” and “benefits,” and thus his argument abounds in *apriori justifications* rooted in ideological axioms. It is interesting to note that *Third World Quarterly* that has established Edward Said Award with the cooperation of Global Development Studies Graduate Paper, should call Gilley’s article a “viewpoint essay” and “innocently” publish it as the FIRST in an issue. Ironically enough, Gilley manoeuvres boldly on the binary opposition between western self and non-western other the critique of which forms the basis of Said’s discursive analysis of orientalism.

Sara Khan criticizes the empirical and historical accuracy of Gilley’s article. She believes that Gilley is biased in his selection of quotes from

Berney Sèbe's article, is inaccurate when he says decolonization was sudden, is unfair when he ignores the fact that benefits of colonialism were out of proportion with its harms, and is incorrect when he attributes the abolition of slavery to colonialism. She deems such an article dangerous because it would "perpetuate dubious justifications for U.S. military interventionism and long-term nation-building projects in distant lands with populations that resent foreign occupation." Khan's warning is significant when we pay attention to the way Gilley masks the ideological bias of his own writing by highlighting that of anti-colonial critique: "The origins of anti-colonial thought were political and ideological. The purpose was not historical accuracy but contemporaneous advocacy"(5). Gilley's silence about colonial atrocities and his insistence on the benefits of colonialism for the colonized, and his dismissal of anti-colonial thought as ideological are rooted in interventionist ideology hidden behind projections and *rhyming witticisms*.

I think the most vulnerable part of this article is where Gilley tries to indicate the "subjective legitimacy" of colonialism, by which he means people subjected to colonialism treated it as "rightful" (4). He borrows from Michael Hechter, for example, to say that alien rule is preferable to self-government. He not only reduces Hechter's arguments to a sentence that cannot do justice to what the Hechter's book says, but also thwarts his arguments in favour of colonialism. Hechter in the introduction explains that his book considers "the *possibility* that good alien governance *may be* better than bad native governance"[emphasis is mine](2). Gilley's rendition of this sentence seems biased: "Alien rule has often been legitimate in world history because it has provided better governance than the indigenous alternative" (4). Hechter does not claim that alien rule has been legitimate, he refers to terms and conditions that sound far-fetched and frankly admits that the promise of effective and fair alien rule is "cold comfort"(139). Hechter talks about possibilities: "aliens *can* govern more objectively—and with less corruption—than natives who are considered *more likely* to be compromised by their ties to local, often competing, interest groups"(139); while Gilley has already labelled alien rule as legitimate. Hechter considers the possibility of alien rule with much reserve and speaks in length about the reasons it has

been dismissed in favour of national self-determination, while Gilley simply uses the adjective “better” to defend alien rule. Gilley seems to have an attitude when it comes to history. He unabashedly offers his own version of history.

One of the examples Gilley mentions to show that the indigenous people welcomed the imperial intervention is James Brooke who was appointed the Rajah of Sarawak by the Sultan of Brunei. Gilley fabricates a fairy tale ending for James Brooke’s story: “order and prosperity expanded to such an extent that even once a British protectorate was established in 1888, the Sultan preferred to leave it under Brooke family control until 1946”(4). No reference is made to Syarif Masahor and Datu Patinggi Abdul Gapur’s long resistance against Brookes occupation of Sarawak. According to Giley, Sarawak “lived” happily ever after when Brooke was appointed its Rajah.

Another evidence used by Gilley to prove the subjective legitimacy of colonialism is his borrowing from Sir Alan Burns, the governor of the Gold Coast during World War II; who talks of how people of the Gold Coast willingly joined the British Army. I doubt whether it is academically accurate to prove the subjective legitimacy of colonialism by referring to the legitimizing words of the colonizer. Ibhawoh analyses the reasons behind the willing participations of West Africans in the second world war and holds that the west African intelligentsia were worried about the dominance of Nazis regime because it would lead to the re-enslavement of Africans, therefore they joined the pro-British campaign. But at the same time, west Africans were questioning the double standards of the British Empire. Ibhawoh highlights the way war time propaganda “strengthened longstanding nationalist demands and hastened the emergence of African political voices in several ways”(238). Holbrook too, refers to the overwhelming role of “communications network which included radio broadcasting, information bureaux, and mobile cinema presentations” to produce voluntary war efforts but he also explains that propaganda was not enough to provide the forces that British commanders needed, therefore, “force was used to despatch young men to medical examination centres. Compulsory service regulations were used to draft men for specific job categories, including drivers,

mechanics, and medical corpsmen; and in some cases young men without special job skills were dramatically 'press ganged' into military service"(359). As can be seen, Giley offers a very distorted picture of the colonial encounter between west Africa and British forces. Giley's silence about the wartime publicity scheme and the employment of force in the process of recruitment bespeaks his ideological biases.

Sir Alan Burns presents a self-congratulatory description of the loyalty of west Africans to British Empire during the second world war. The reluctance to see through the cooperation of West Africans indicates the extent to which denial can be efficient in the propagandist war time campaign. The complications of the colonial encounter need to be taken into consideration in the argument, but Gilley does not seem to be committed to academic accuracy since he wraps up the colonial plight of several former colonies in 18 pages. Manipulation and simplification of the colonial history seems to be the only way to prove the legitimacy of colonialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Do I recommend the article? Yes, because it indicates how long-running ideologies can self-righteously mask themselves and survive, and how a researcher can shock the audience and rock the academic publishing market and, uhmm, "boost" a journal's impact.

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