

DECOLONIAL INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

A decolonial critique of the racist case for colonialism

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Introduction

A white racist scholar, [Bruce Gilley](#), from Portland State University, Oregon, USA, published an article in Third World Quarterly with the title "*The case for colonialism*".² Third World Quarterly is a monthly academic journal published by Routledge. The article begins with the following sentence: "*For the last 100 years, Western colonialism has had a bad name.*"³

It was widely discussed on the internet. For people who have been the victim of colonialism and for civilized people in general the title and the first sentence contains a shocking insult, as is the rest of the article.

Imagine an article with the title: "*The case for Hitler and Nazism*" and the first sentence being: "*For the last 80 years, Hitler and Nazism have had a bad name.*" What academic journal would accept such an article? None.

What university would want to keep the writer in its staff? None.

Why? Because the crimes of Hitler and Nazism have been ingrained in the public memory of victims of Nazism and civilized people around the world. Any attempt to whitewash these crime would be regarded as an insult to the victims of Nazism.

That is not the case for colonialism, because colonialism is not over yet. Many people with a Westernized education believe in positives side of colonialism. We are still in a struggle to decolonize the world.

This article offers a decolonial critique of Gilley. Before I deal with the content, I will go into the discussion on the publication.

The discussion on the publication

"We insist that you, Third World Quarterly, retract and apologize for the publication of Professor Bruce Gilley's appalling article, "The Case for Colonialism" published September 2017. In truth, we originally thought this work

was satire; if that is the case, it is satire that fails. The sentiments expressed in this article reek of colonial disdain for Indigenous peoples and ignore ongoing colonialism in white settler nations." Thus begins one [call](#) for signing a petition against the publication.

Shahid Qadir, the editor-in-chief of Third World Quarterly, [responded](#) as follows: "*Throughout its 40 year history, TWQ has been at the forefront of shaping development discourse, with Viewpoint essays enabling challenging opinions to be tested through rigorous double-blind peer review and then debated upon publication by fellow researchers. As with all articles in the journal, this Viewpoint did undergo double-blind peer review and was subsequently published.*

As the journal's academic editorial team, by publishing this article we are not endorsing its pro-colonial views, as would be the same for any Viewpoint piece. We are however presenting it to be debated within the field and academy, which this justifiably has been."

Sixteen members of the editorial board signed a [letter](#) of resignation in which they expressed their dissatisfaction with the publication: "*We are deeply disappointed by the unacceptable process around the publication of Bruce Gilley's Viewpoint essay, 'The case for colonialism,' which was published in Third World Quarterly without any consultation with the Editorial Board. As International Editorial Board Members, we were told in an email on 15 September from Shahid Qadir that this piece was put through the required double-blind peer review process.... We have ... been informed through correspondence between Prof Ilan Kapoor and our colleague who was the peer-reviewer, after the piece was rejected by the Special Issue editors, that her review also rejected the Viewpoint. Thus, the fact is established that this did not pass the peer-review when we have documentation that it was rejected by three peer reviewers. As the*

Viewpoint did not pass the double-blind peer review as claimed by the editor in the statement he issued in the name of the journal, it must be retracted and a new statement issued."

They state their position on the freedom of expression: *"We all subscribe to the principle of freedom of speech and the value of provocation in order to generate critical debate. However, this cannot be done by means of a piece that fails to meet academic standards of rigour and balance by ignoring all manner of violence, exploitation and harm perpetrated in the name of colonialism (and imperialism) and that causes offence and hurt and thereby clearly violates that very principle of free speech."*

Freedom of speech: the right to be a racist, insulting and uncivilized

In cases like this always the issue of freedom of speech comes up. Shahid Qadir, the editor-in-chief of Third World Quarterly states his position: *"By publishing this article we are not endorsing its pro-colonial views... We are however presenting it to be debated within the field and academy, which this justifiably has been."*

Qadir positions himself as the neutral objective facilitator of an academic debate. He can do that because he frames the discussion on freedom of speech as a judicial problem, as a problem of civil rights. But freedom of speech is only about rights. It is also about ethics, about morality. If you disconnect the ethics from the rights, you end up not only by taking a position on rights, but also on ethics. The ethical dimension of freedom of speech has two aspects:

- The acknowledgement that freedom of speech has an ethical dimension.
- The need to take a position on ethics.

Often things become immediately clear if we apply these principles to Nazism. Nazism is linked to the Holocaust. Any suggestion of neutrality regarding the Holocaust would be regarded as immoral. So if Qadir would get an article with the title *"The case for Hitler and Nazism"* and the arguments being: *"For the last 80 years, Hitler and Nazism have had a bad name"* he would reject it, not primarily on academic grounds, but for ethical reasons. He would not even dare to read the rest of the article or send it for a peer review, because everyone would question his ethical standards, not his academic position.

If you focus the question of freedom of speech only on the judicial rights and disconnect it from ethics you actually block the debate on

the ethical dimension. If you connect them you will pose the following position: *"You have the judicial right to voice racist, uncivilized and insulting opinions. But, tell my, why would you want to do this? What is your moral justification for doing this?"*

This question is blocked from the discussion if you take a one-sided, judicial, approach to the question of freedom of speech.

The question of academic standards

Both Qadir and the editorial board rely on the procedure of peer review to guarantee a proper academic environment that could prevent a publication like Gilley's article. Qadir argues that the article was properly reviewed by peers. The editorial board argues that it was not. They base their information on three reviewers who had rejected the article for publication.

The board thinks that the article should have been rejected because *"it fails to provide reliable findings, as demonstrated by its failure in the double-blind peer review process."*

The boards claims to adhere to *"academic standards of rigour and balance"*. The article *"fails criterion #1 of the Committee on Publication Ethics COPE guidelines that state: 'Journal editors should consider retracting a publication if: they have clear evidence that the findings are unreliable, either as a result of misconduct (e.g. data fabrication) or honest error (e.g. miscalculation or experimental error).'"*

The board uses as the main criterion for judging the article the problem of reliable findings, of correct data. There she falls in the positivists trap of accepting the ethics underlying Eurocentric knowledge production. Let us look how this applies to Gilley.

The main argument of Gilley

Take the main the argument of Gilley. His argument is this: *"Western colonialism was, as a general rule, both objectively beneficial and subjectively legitimate in most of the places where it was found, using realistic measures of those concepts. The countries that embraced their colonial inheritance, by and large, did better than those that spurned it. Anti-colonial ideology imposed grave harms on subject peoples and continues to thwart sustained development and a fruitful encounter with modernity in many places. Colonialism can be recovered by weak and fragile states today in three ways: by reclaiming colonial modes of governance; by recolonising some areas; and by creating new Western colonies from scratch."*¹⁴

The positivist critique: true or false

The argument of Gilley consists of three propositions:

1. Colonialism was beneficial for the colonized.
2. The countries that embraced their colonial inheritance did better than those that rejected it.
3. Anti-colonial ideology imposed grave harms on the people that were colonized.

Based on these propositions he then continues to argue for recolonization.

The board takes a positivist approach in its critique by referring to the criteria in the Guidance from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). The main criterion is: "*Clear evidence that the findings are unreliable, either as a result of misconduct (e.g. data fabrication) or honest error (e.g. miscalculation or experimental error).*"

In the positivist approach the argument of Gilley is judged by the data he brings forward for his propositions, because it is a matter of true or false. Is it true that colonialism was beneficial for the colonized? Is it true that the countries that have embraced their colonial inheritance did better than those that rejected it? Is it true that the anti-colonial ideology imposed grave harms on the people that were colonized?

To answer these questions in the positivist methodology you have to draw up a list of variables for the propositions. How do you measure the cost and benefits of colonialism? Roads, medical care, education, economic growth, civil rights? How do you measure the performance of countries that have embraced their colonial legacy compared to those who have rejected it? Roads, medical care, education, economic growth, civil rights? How do you measure the harms that anti-colonial ideology has imposed on the people that were colonized? Roads, medical care, education, economic growth, civil rights?

Within the positivist methodology the critique on Gilley can only move in two directions:

1. Is he using the correct variables to answer the questions?
2. Is he using the correct data on the variables?

The positivists methodology uses a two value logic: true or false. Ultimately the critique of Gilley boils down to answering both questions with "false".

In the positivist methodology ethics is artificially removed from knowledge production. Ethics is not about true or false, but about right or wrong. If you remove ethics from knowledge production, you end up in a

mess as becomes clear in the case of Gilley. Many people feel that there is an ethical problem here (reappraisal of a crime against humanity), yet positivism forces them to argue along non-ethical lines. If you use the positivist methodology you end up arguing about the variables and the data? Is it correct to use medical care as a variable? Should you use the number of death per 1,000 persons in the data collection?

The decolonial methodology provides a more comprehensive framework for critiquing the nonsense of Gilley.

Decolonizing The Mind (DTM) methodology

In my forthcoming book **Decolonizing The Mind** I explain that knowledge production is not only about true and false but also about right or wrong.⁵ In the DTM methodology we bring the underlying ethics of positivist knowledge production to the fore (right or wrong) and lay bare the consequences for data collection and analysis (true or false).

The first question we ask Gilley is not about variables and the underlying data, but about ethics: "*Where did the colonizer get the moral right to invade and steal land that was not theirs, rape and murder their people, force them to work for free and steal their goods?*" That is the primary question that should be answered. And the answer is that there is no moral basis for civilized people to justify theft, rape or murder.

Once you have established the ethical basis (colonialism was wrong), then it is easier to answer the questions of variables and data. The answer to these questions is simple: "*It does not matter.*"

Take a white man who enslaves, beats and rapes a group of women on a daily basis. He insults them. He forces them to work. But then he provides two of them nice clothes to wear. He gives them shoes and better food than the others. He let them live in the attic. Now the white man shows the two women the house of a black man and woman and their family, who are free from forced labour. They are poor. They and their children have worn out clothes. They have less to eat than the white men's enslaved women. And then the white man, who by the way claims to be a scientist, say to the enslaved women: "*Take the variable of clothing and food. Can you see that you are better off than the free black man and his family?*" And he expects the women to answer: "*Yes master, it is OK to rape and enslave us, because that is why we have better cloths and food that the free man and woman.*"

Any sane person would regard this as an insane answer: *"Please rape and enslave me so I can have better cloths and food!"* The decolonial answer to Gilley is: *"It does not matter. If you have built more roads on stolen land, this does not give you the right to steal the land. If, compared to free labourers, you have given better clothing to people you have enslaved, this does not give you the right to enslave people."* For any civilized person this should not be difficult to understand. Alas, people whose mind has been colonized are not civilized. They come up with the most insulting and racist argument to justify crimes against humanity. The positivist methodology enables them to hide their insults and racism in variables and data. The decolonial methodology brings their ethics to the fore and shows how that influences their research in such a way that they produce knowledge for the colonization of the mind.

Racism in research

The example I mentioned above is not far fetched. In the US historiography of enslavement white scholars – and the black house negroes they have trained - have made this argument. Two white scholars, R. Fogel and S. Engerman published a study titled "Time on the Cross" that makes this argument on the basis of statistical evidence: *"The material (not psychological) conditions of the lives of slaves compared favourably with those of free industrial workers."*⁶ Fogel, a Nobel Prize winner of economics, even argued that there is a natural right for white enslavers to enslave black people: *"The religious radicals who sparked the abolitionist movement, convinced that they were divinely inspired, dismissed the dilemma that had beset the founding fathers between the natural right of the enslaved to their freedom and the natural right of the masters to the security of their property."*⁷

The fact that Gilley is a white scholar should be part of the debate. His article is not only about faulty scholarship. It is also about racism. His faulty scholarship is inherent to his racism. His argument for colonialism is an argument for a system that produced racism in knowledge production. Leaving race out of the discussion is leaving a basis characteristic of colonialism out of the debate.

Gilley is not an individual with poor scholarship. He is a representative of a school that produces knowledge like this on a regular basis. They have been strengthened by the victory of Donald Trump. The critique should not be about the individual. It should be about the school he represents.

The case for reparations for colonialism

A decolonial methodology leads to a different set of questions and data about the impact of colonialism on the colonizer and the colonized. In my book on reparations I dealt with these questions.⁸ I even used the answers to build a mathematical model to calculate the reparations that the countries of the colonizers should pay to the colonized.

I use the following propositions of civilized people:

1. If you build an enterprise on land that is not yours, you should pay rent. Colonization was the conquest of land that did not belong to the Europeans.
2. You should not steal. If you take goods that are not yours, you should pay for them. In my model I take account of the value of the minerals and other material goods that Europeans have stolen and taken away without payment.
3. If somebody performs labour on your behalf, you should pay a proper wage for his or her services. In my model I calculate the hours of non-paid labour during slavery. Apart from non-paid labour there is also underpaid labour. That is labour that did not get the wage that was considered proper in Europe for the services that were provided by the labourers.
4. If you intentionally (or even unintentionally) cause injury to an individual or a community you should pay compensation for the injury. In the case of an individual the injury can vary from emotional injury (stress from forced labour or kidnapping) to injury in property and body. In the case of a community, the injury consists in the annihilation of social institutions, the destruction of human dignity and the suppression of basic human rights. A basic civilized principle in these cases is that the victim should be compensated and not the perpetrator. The Europeans have reversed this principle. When they abolished slavery in the Americas, the criminals were compensated. They got a sum of money per enslaved person as compensation for their crime. In my model I compensate the victim, not the criminal.
5. If you have a debt, you should pay interest. This is an accepted principle in economics and morality in the west. If you were a Muslim, you might argue that interest is forbidden in Islam, so no interest can be charged. In my model I have used half of the interest rate that a European power (France) has imposed on a colonized

people (the people of Haiti) when they demanded and got reparations for enslavement, which was 6%.

On the basis of these proposition I have calculated that the amount the countries of the colonizers should pay to the colonized countries is US \$ 321,090,670,376,971,000 (US \$ 321 quadrillion), that is 10,364 times the total colonizers GDP of 2013.

The answer to Gilley's case for colonialism is my case for reparations.

How to move forward?

My critique does not bear on the respect I have for the board members who decided to resign in protest of the publication and use positivists arguments. I applaud their courage and support their call for retracting the article. In the same way I respect and support the other people who are calling for retraction of the article. The publication is an insult to victims of colonialism.

But for me the debate is not about Gilley, but about his racism, his positivist methodology and the need to decolonize the mind in knowledge production.

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² Gilley, B. (2017): The case for colonialism. *Third World Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037>. Accessed 12-9-2017.

³ Idem, p. 1.

⁴ Idem.

⁵ Hira, S. (2018): *Decolonizing The Mind. An introduction to decolonial theory and practice*. Amrit Publishers. The Hague.

⁶ Fogel, R. and S. Engerman (1974): *Time on the Cross. The Economics of American Negro Slavery*. Wildwood House. London, p. 6.

⁷ R. Fogel: Fogel, R.W. (2003): *The slavery debates, 1952-1990. A retrospective*. Louisiana State University Press. Baton Rouge, p. 6.

⁸ Hira, S. (2014): *20 Questions and Answer on Reparations for Colonialism*. Amrit Publishers. The Hague, p. 76-78.