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CONTENTS

Editorial

- Decolonising African Studies – The Politics of Publishing 3
Tanya Lyons

Articles

- Africa's Past Invented to Serve Development's Uncertain Future 13
Scott MacWilliam

- A Critique of Colonial Rule: A Response to Bruce Gilley 39
Martin A. Klein

- Curbing Inequality Through Decolonising Knowledge Production in Higher Education in South Africa 53
Leon Mwamba Tshimpaka

- "There is really discrimination everywhere": Experiences and consequences of *Everyday Racism* among the new black African diaspora in Australia 81
Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo and Virginia Mapedzahama

- 'African-Australian' Identity in the Making: Analysing its Imagery and Explanatory Power in View of Young Africans in Australia 110
Abay Gebrekidan

- Africa 'Pretty Underdone': 2017 Submissions to the DFAT White Paper and Senate Inquiry 130
Helen Ware and David Lucas

- Celebrating 40 Years of the *Australasian Review of African Studies: A Bibliography of Articles* 144
Tanya Lyons

Book Reviews	170
<i>AIDS Doesn't Show Its Face: Inequality, Morality and Social Change in Nigeria, by Daniel Jordan Smith</i> Tass Holmes	
ARAS - Call for Papers	174
AFSAAP Annual Conference 2018 - Call for Papers	180



A Critique of Colonial Rule: A Response to Bruce Gilley

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Abstract

Bruce Gilley has done the Africanist community a favor. In defending colonial rule, he forces us to define what colonial rule was really like. The problem is that he gets his facts wrong. He is right about a few things. For example, African nationalists often did not have massive support, colonial rule ended the slave trade, and Africans participated in colonial rule. That participation was because colonial rule was weak and under-funded. That explains its reliance on African intermediaries and its brutality. The notion that colonial rule was based on universal values is contradicted by the harshness of the conquest and its treatment of dissent. It relied heavily on forced labor. Colonial rule was racist. Colonial rulers ignored famines, and actually did little for health and education. Gilley sees colonial rule as training for self-government, but in most of Africa, there was little training and reluctance until the very end to think about self-government. Gilley ends with a program for recolonization which is in the interest of neither the former colonizers or the colonized. Particularly absurd is the notion of re-engaging Portugal, the worst of the colonial powers.

Introduction

I very much regret that the Third World Quarterly has withdrawn the Bruce Gilley article *The Case for Colonialism* (Gilley, 2017). It is a valuable article because it raises questions we should be dealing with. We should be dealing with these questions because they are crucial parts of the divide between academic and public discourse. Many of the students who enter our classes do so with ideas similar to Gilley's. So too do many opinion leaders, both in politics and in the media. Donald Trump's offensive reference to

“shit-hole countries” was only an extreme variant (*ABC News*, 2018). In 2007, French President Nicholas Sarkozy gave a patronising speech at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, which praised colonial contributions to Africa and criticised Africans for not embracing progress (Sarkozy, 2007; Konaré, 2008). I have been told that Henry Kissinger used to end meetings by asking the Under Secretary of State for Africa to report on the latest communications from Ugandan President Idi Amin. Nothing like a little laughter to end a meeting. The Gilley article thus gives us a chance to deal with ideas that are part of public discourse.

There is a larger question here. As a scholar, who was active in civil rights, peace and liberation support movements, and was often active in local politics, I have often wrestled with the relationship between my politics, my teaching and my scholarship. Early on, while teaching in Berkeley, I accepted the notion that teachers should lay out at the beginning of a course their ideology, but I soon moved away from that. As a teacher, I tried to present diverse perspectives, to encourage debate, and to provide a receptive environment for students with unpopular views. As a scholar, I always had to question whether I was right and to ask whether my analysis was correct. Self-criticism began with the idea that I might be wrong. I have been offended over the years by efforts of the right, the left and even the timid center to censure ideas they dislike. If we wish our unpopular ideas to be taken seriously, we must be able to listen to the ideas of others. We should listen to people like Gilley and answer them.

Did Gilley get his facts right?

That being said, Gilley’s article is seriously flawed. He often does not get his facts right. He starts with the statement that “for a hundred years, colonialism has had a bad name” (2017, p.1). Anti-colonialism goes back to the late 19th century, but in Africa, the 1920’s were the high water period of colonialism. The idea that European countries had a right to rule other people certainly remained popular into the 1950s and probably has significant support even today. So is the notion that some societies are so backward or incompetent that we have an obligation to take them over. The colonial figures, whether Livingstone or Stanley marching through the jungle or the European administrator in his pith helmet were and for many still are romantic figures. Gilley makes a lot of other errors, for example, including among countries with no colonial past Libya, Haiti and Guatemala.

He is right about a few things. African nationalists did not usually have massive support (for example, Zolberg (1966) pointed out that many

nationalists had difficulties mobilising the masses or even getting them out to vote). Nationalists had to create a nation in societies where primary identities were local or ethnic. It is also true that decolonisation was often too quick. This was particularly true in the Congo where there was absolutely no preparation for independence and where many Belgians hoped that it would all fall apart. Still, it would be incorrect to say that nationalists imposed “sudden decolonization on hapless populations” (Gilley, 2017, p.2). The interesting question is why colonial regimes quit so quickly, but the answer is probably that most colonies were no longer profitable and colonial interests were weak after World War II. Gilley rightly points out that scholars have debated whether there was too much colonialism or too little. This was a constructive debate.¹

Gilley is also right that many Africans participated in the colonial state. The vast majority of employees of the colonial state were Africans, but those Africans did not necessarily work for colonial rulers because of affection for them (Lawrance, Osborn and Roberts, 2006). They worked for the colonial state because they wanted to better themselves, because most saw no other option and because they could profit from their role as intermediaries.² The colonial state was rather weak, largely because of its fragile tax base. European parliaments were reluctant to underwrite the projects of colonial proconsuls. Those proconsuls had no choice but to squeeze as much revenue as it could out of hoe-wielding farmers, who at best, worked about a hectare of land apiece. Customs was the only other major source of revenue. Only in southern Africa did mineral wealth produce significant profits. Elsewhere, returns were limited and so was investment. Most of Africa produced little profit for capitalism. The result was what Hopkins called “light administration” (Hopkins, 1973, p.189; Herbst, 2000).

Hopkins tells us that almost half of the revenue of West African regimes went to salaries, pensions, and benefits of colonial administrators (Hopkins, 1973, p.191). Some of the rest went into repayment of loans for capital improvements essential for the exploitation of Africa. The result was that there was not a lot of money for everyone else. During the conquest period, many colonial armies were made up largely of slaves, sometimes freed slaves, but often slaves bought in the market. In the French army, they were rewarded by the right to pillage defeated areas and received female slaves

¹ Phillips (1989) argued from a Marxist perspective that the failure of the British to smash traditional structures was a source of difficulty. The problem was that the colonial powers wanted their empire on the cheap. This argument is effectively made by Berry (1992).

² The best introduction to the colonial state is Amadou Hampaté Bâ's (1994) memoir of his years as a clerk. See also his satirical novel, *The Fortunes of Wangrin* (1999).

after their victories (Echenberg, 1991; Klein, 2011). Colonial regimes depended heavily on chiefs, who were usually recruited from the families of former rulers. They often received a percentage of head or hut taxes they collected, but generally had to supplement it with what they could get out of their subjects, who often had to work the chief's fields during the growing season and to pay for the chief's justice. The clerks, interpreters, messengers and guards who worked for every field administrator also were able to supplement their meager salaries by gifts and bribes. Corruption did not begin with decolonisation. Let me be clear that these moral compromises were the only way colonial elites could have their colonies.

Gilley is also right that colonial regimes ended the slave trade. I first interviewed in rural Senegal in the 1960s when there were still people alive who remembered the arrival of the French. Several of my informants said that the most important benefit they received from the French is that they no longer had to carry guns into the fields (Klein, 1968). In large parts of Africa, people had lived in constant fear of slave raiders. The abolition of slave-raiding and the slave trade was crucial to the development of a modern capitalist economy. Slavery was also usually abolished, though in many British colonies only in the 1930s, and in many colonies, enforcement was weak and ambiguous. There were areas where enslavement remained significant and in many places slaves and their descendants continued to have obligations to former masters.³

Gilley's view of colonial rule

Gilley writes that the “case for Western colonialism involves reaffirming the primacy of human lives, universal values and shared responsibilities” (2017, p. 1). I am not sure what this means. European armies often marched uninvited into someone else's territories and then waited for the African force to attack. Where they could choose the battlefield, they assumed a defensive position, and when the African forces attacked, hundreds would be killed. The British massacred spear-carrying Kenyan warriors and the Portuguese were massacring demonstrators in the 1960s. When the French captured a city, their field artillery often battered a hole in the walls, and their allies were then allowed to ransack the city. Women and

³ Most slave-raiding ended by the first years of the 20th century, but for a chief who continued into the 1920s see Hamman Yaji, in Vaughan & Kirk-Greene (1995). For another chief who took slaves and used them into the 1950s with the full knowledge of the French administration see Sehou (2013). On the stigma and the perpetuation of servile relations, see Rossi (2009; and 2015).

children were taken prisoner and then distributed, with French officers taking the prettiest (Klein, 1998: 119-121). Lugard (1922) believed that it was important that there be a physical conquest and an act of submission. Was this the value they showed for human life??

Unable to tax revenues that did not exist, colonial regimes used forced labour.⁴ In its most extreme version, Congolese peasants were required to go into the forests and bring back a certain amount of rubber. Leopold's minions did not believe in the carrot and the stick. The stick sufficed. The death toll has been estimated as high as 10 million, almost equal to the number of slaves exported in the whole Atlantic trade (Hochschild, 2005). The French on the north side of the Congo River and the Portuguese in Mozambique also gave concession companies the right to force people to work without pay (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1972; Amin and Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1974; Allina, 2012). Elsewhere, people had labour obligations. Large projects like railroads were particularly costly. Two railroads were constructed from the Atlantic coast to Malebo Pool, sites of Brazzaville and Kinshasa, each through difficult terrain and each at a high cost in human lives. In Guinea the death toll was high, in part because men were not fed if they could not work. Some change resulted when administrators complained that chiefs could no longer recruit labour because so many were dying (Klein, 1998, p. 152; Fall, 1993).

Thomas Malthus has a lot to answer for. Droughts and famines were common in colonial Africa. Colonial regimes generally did not feel an obligation to provide relief, often even trying to collect taxes in hard times. This was also true in Ireland and in India. Those who ignored suffering could generally justify their insensitivity by arguing that it was a demographic correction or that it was caused by laziness (Vaughan, 1987; Klein, 1998, pps. 128-29, 174-78, 210-11). I have never seen any reason to accept the myth of the lazy native. I have been struck by the resourcefulness of people faced with climatic disaster, both during the colonial period and after. The depression also brought hard times, as peasants from poor areas often found that dry season migration did not enable them to meet their tax obligations. In French West Africa, there was a resurgence of pawning, encouraged by many colonial administrators, who recognised that fathers could always raise money for taxes by pawning their daughters (Klein and Roberts, 1987).

I am not sure where Gilley sees universal values in this. To be sure, there are humane teachings in all three Abrahamic religions. Missionaries were

⁴ The idea of forced labour as a form of taxation was developed in a panel on the subject at a recent conference of the American Historical Association (Gardner, 2018; Van Waijenberg, 2018).

sensitive to human suffering as were some administrators and Muslim clerics. In famine years, however, missions often had difficulty feeding themselves and whatever feelings individuals had, the state was generally insensitive. What were the universal values in the appropriation of good lands in the two Rhodesias and Kenya for the benefit of small settler populations (Kennedy, 1987)? These colonies suffered from rigid forms of segregation, which actually tried to limit the participation of Africans in the government of their own countries. Lord Lugard wrote about trusteeship and many colonial theorists talked about preparing Africans for self-government, but not much was really done (Lugard, 1922). In British West African colonies, the role of Creole elites was reduced. During the 19th century, these elites played a major role in the administration of colonies, in the expansion of the colonial state, and in the development of the colonial economy, but their role was reduced when advances in medicine made it easier for Europeans to live in Africa. By the beginning of the 20th century, neither servants nor senior African civil servants could live in Freetown's Hill Station or even stay overnight there (Spitzer, 1974). Racism was everywhere the partner of colonialism.

If Africans were being trained for self-government, why was there almost no African participation in governing? The only colony in which there was serious participation was Senegal. That participation was limited to the coastal towns called the Four Communes (Johnson, 1971). Curiously, Senegal is one of Africa's most stable democracies. It is also a nation that respects freedom of expression and the right to dissent. Was that perhaps in part because they participated in French electoral institutions during the colonial period? It is true that colonial regimes depended heavily on African chiefs, but these chiefs were often poorly educated, were hostile to educated elites and became instruments of colonial authority. By and large, they had a commitment to neither modernisation nor to a national ideal and rarely played a role in creating post-colonial states. In French Africa, there was an experiment after World War II in African participation in the French parliament, which meant that after 1958, those who took power generally had some experience of government.

This calls into question Gilley's notion that colonialism involved training for self-government. It is true that being a clerk provided training for many. In the Congo, when Belgian administrators left hastily, clerks just moved into the administrator's job as some had done even under colonial rule when there was no replacement for a sick or deceased administrator. The biggest problem faced by newly independent states was not bureaucratic training, but ethnic conflict. Colonial regimes created or took advantage of divisions that

existed and rarely created integrative institutions. In the Congo, there was not anarchy, but rather, a series of ethnic wars between 1960 and 1965.⁵ The British protected northern Nigeria from southern progressives and the southern Sudan from northern Muslims. Most new nations had no sense of national identity and most nationalist leaders knew that they had to create one. When I asked Adu Boahen, the Ghanaian historian, who was a critic of Kwame Nkrumah if Nkrumah had done any good, he said that Nkrumah had created a sense of national identity. Today in Nigeria, young people often do their national service and sometimes go to university outside of their home districts. Even in the Congo, the corrupt Mobutu regime tried to force civil servants to take postings outside of their home province.

If colonial regimes were serious about training Africans for self-government, education would have been a higher priority. In British Africa, schools were largely run by missionaries. Some schooling was necessary because colonial administrations needed clerks and school teachers and wanted chiefs to be literate. Those who received higher education usually did so in the metropole, but until the late colonial period, there was often little place for them back in Africa.⁶ In British West Africa, there was more room for educated Africans. The Creole elite included ministers, lawyers, journalists, and civil servants. Until after World War II, there were only two university colleges in Africa, both attached to British universities. To the best of my knowledge, there was not a single African professional economist in Africa in 1950 and probably no engineers. Only in the late 1930's did the British and French begin to recognise that they would have to invest in education and social welfare.

Gilley also thinks that health care was an important justification for colonial rule. Some Africans did benefit from campaigns against epidemic disease, from improved public health, and from limited access to modern medicine. The availability of medical care, particularly for pregnant women and children, was a major factor in stabilising the labour force on the

⁵ In 1969, I visited Thysville, where a number of subaltern officials had moved into former colonial positions. This worked well because Thysville was solidly Bakongo and there was a locally dominant party, ABAKO. The local archives were usable and the work ethic in the office was better than in the national capital.

⁶ In my early research in Senegal, I was fascinated by a man named Insa Ba. Member of a Muslim clerical family, he was sent to the School for the Sons of Chiefs, where his performance led to him being sent to a lycée in Algiers. When he returned to Senegal, the French first made him a teacher and then a chief. He performed poorly in both positions, probably because neither was what he wanted. He had no other options. His son became a successful chief and his descendants include many educated professionals (Klein, 1968, pp. 211-213).

Copperbelt. There were also missionary establishments like the hospital in Lambaréné, Gabon, run by Albert Schweitzer. There were schools for medical assistants and for what the French labelled *médecins africains*, who were not authorised to treat Europeans or to practise in European countries. Hospitals, however, were generally located in capital cities and were primarily for the small European populations, though some Africans benefitted.

It is interesting that most African countries have made education and health major priorities. Though colonial regimes increased expenditures for education in the last years of colonial rule, relatively few countries were at the moment of independence educating more than 10% of their children and some had less than 5% in schools. Today, almost four fifths of African children are in school, a higher percentage among boys and in cities. More than half of adults have some level of literacy. Higher education has also expanded dramatically. When I first went to Dakar in 1963, the second university in French West Africa had only just been created. The University of Dakar had less than 5,000 students, the vast majority boys, and was the only higher education institution for almost all of French West Africa. Today, there are over 60,000 students at the Cheikh Anta Diop University and there are 12 other universities in Senegal, four of them public, seven private. At last count, Nigeria had 148 universities.

Health care saw a similar expansion, though many countries had to cut back health care expenditures when the International Monetary Fund imposed drastic funding cuts under structural adjustment programs in the 1980's and after. The biggest problem for many sick people is not seeing a doctor, but being able to pay for medicine. A Senegalese friend told me that if he had not taken a job in the United States, he could not have paid for his mother's heart medication. Africa has also had to deal with wars and the Aids and Ebola crises. In spite of this, there has been a dramatic increase in life expectancy all over Africa. At the time of decolonisation, life expectancy in most African countries averaged around or a little above 40 years. Today, most African countries have a life expectancy of over 60 years, often well over. There have been problems in both education and health care, but progress has been greater than under colonial rule.

Recolonisation

In spite of this, Gilley has proposed a program of recolonisation. It has three planks. First, he wants African and other Third World countries to replicate colonial governance. He cannot explain why some countries have

done well. He mentions Singapore, Belize and Botswana. He could mention others like Mauritius, Korea, Ghana or Senegal. These countries are all doing better than they ever did under colonial rule. Botswana had the good fortune that De Beers discovered diamonds, but it has used that bit of luck better than most oil-rich countries. It has a very professional civil service and is well administered. Countries that have done well politically or economically are not doing so because they have taken over colonial ways. They are more efficient and more dynamic than any colonial regime.

Gilley's second proposal for recolonisation involves Third World countries inviting European states to take over political, economic or military activities. Gilley thinks that there are roles that independent African countries could turn over to Europeans, but there are few situations in which that is likely. For example, I cannot imagine, the lawyers and judges of any country consigning their justice system to benevolent Europeans if benevolent and unbiased Europeans could be found. In fact, the emergence of a legal profession has been a crucial result of decolonisation and lawyers have played a major role in democracy movements. Europeans and Americans play an important role in many African countries. The French have been particularly heavily involved in their former colonies. Their participation in the CFA franc mechanism has operated to the interests of both France and its African partners, but those partners are well aware that the French participate in their own interests.⁷ Gilley is a political scientist. He cannot be unaware that nations, groups and persons generally act to further their own interests.

Finally, Gilley suggests the Hong Kongisation of Africa. He would like Guinea-Bissau to give the island of Galinhas to Portugal in the hope that the Portuguese will manage the island in a dynamic way, attract people from the mainland and influence mainland political structures. In making the proposal, he misrepresents Hong Kong and Singapore. These were islands occupied by the British as strategic trade entrepôts. In neither case did Britain have any charitable intention toward neighboring Asian societies. People were attracted to both places because they fulfilled the economic role assigned. Galinhas has nothing in common with Singapore or Hong Kong except that it is underpopulated. Given Portugal's record as a colonial power, I cannot imagine any African country wanting them back. Nor can I imagine Portugal having any interest in such an arrangement. They are doing better without their colonial empire than they were doing with it.

⁷ There are two currencies within the Communauté Financière Africaine, a West African franc serving eight countries and an Equatorial franc serving six. France is a member of both banks of issue.

Conclusion

Both leftist and nationalist writers often describe the milking of Africa's wealth by colonial capitalism. In fact, Africa was poor. The slave trade had contributed to European economic development, but by the time the European powers divided the African pie, Africa offered little of value to those Europeans. European parliaments were not willing to underwrite African development. There was little taxable wealth in most colonies. Only mineral wealth in south and central Africa promised profits. The Congo Free State would have gone broke if the rubber boom had not saved Leopold's enterprise. The problem was that even rubber could only be exploited through extreme brutality. The Congo, however, was an extreme version of a system that depended on different kinds of forced labour.

Administrators could not be attracted to Africa without comfortable salaries and pensions. The lack of resources meant a very thin layer of administration that ruled through a body of intermediaries culled both from the traditional ruling class and the emerging educated African class. Though administrators were often attracted to the freedom of the colonial situation, they were insecure. They depended on chiefs, clerks and guards. They therefore had to maintain social distance and to maintain the myth that they were indispensable. They could not accept the clerks as equals and they certainly could not accept the idea of incorporating Africans in senior administration. Conversely, the clerks, the teachers and the 'been-tos' who studied abroad could not indefinitely accept the roles to which they had been consigned. This produced many of the fundamental characteristics of colonial rule. It was authoritarian and it was racist. It was not innovative. If it prepared Africans for self-government, it was only that the clerk in the outer office knew everything that happened in the inner office.

Relations between Europeans and their African underlings were structured, hierarchical and based on social distance. They did not socialise. Europeans rarely knew or understood the Africans who worked for them, though there are exceptions. Gilley could find their stories in fiction and in memoirs. Joyce Cary's experience as a colonial administrator produced four novels that vividly depict the colonial situation. In one, a son of the ruler returns from Oxford, better educated than most of the local colonials and speaking the King's English. They cannot treat him the way they would treat other natives, but he is not one of them (Cary, 1949). The reformist climate of post World War II French West Africa led to a young Senegalese intellectual, Alioune Diop, being appointed *chef de cabinet* for the governor of Senegal. He invited Georges Balandier, then a young sociologist, to stay

with him in Dakar. Balandier claimed that the white community was very disturbed by this, but conversations at Diop's kitchen table probably contributed to Balandier becoming the most influential Africanist social scientist in France. A third case is Jomo Kenyatta. Gilley suggests that if Britain had left Kenya to Mau Mau, the result would have been "anarchy and more civil war" (p. 4), but the real alternative was Jomo Kenyatta and a nationalist elite. Jomo Kenyatta went to England as a representative of the Kikuyu Central Association. While there, he picked up a doctorate and became well-known in the Labour Party, which was then governing Britain. When he returned to Kenya, he offered his services to Governor Philip Mitchell, who spurned him, suggesting that he get involved in his native authority. Kenyatta then became the leader of the Kenya African Union, but was jailed on trumped-up charges. The KAU was one of Africa's more mature nationalist parties (Rosberg and Nottingham, 1966). Britain had to find other interlocutors. It eventually did so, but only because Britain had no choice. Anarchy and civil war were never at issue.

A lot of unpleasant things have happened since the end of colonial rule. There have been wars and numerous authoritarian regimes. History is often messy. This should not lead us to idealise colonial regimes, which were authoritarian, racist and often stagnant. Our own histories involve wars, revolutions and misgovernment. Independence has improved the lives of many Africans. Whatever our disappointments, decolonisation has opened up opportunities for many people. If colonial rule had lasted, Kofi Annan and Wole Soyinka would probably have been clerks or school-teachers. There is no reason to go backwards. It is unlikely that many of the colonised or the colonisers would profit from doing so.

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