

Comment

LAWRENCE JAMES

DECEMBER 5 2017, 12:01AM, THE TIMES

Empires have done good and we must feel free to say so

LAWRENCE JAMES



Share



Save



Professor Bruce Gilley has triggered a sudden outbreak of contagious apoplexy among historians. In an article for the academic journal *Third World Quarterly* he had the temerity to suggest that “colonialism” was not without virtue, by which he means that there were countries that benefited from imperial government, and more outrageous still, that many would be better off if it

Comment

Calmer spirits responded that to snuff out Professor Gilley's opinions was a betrayal of academic freedom.

As the antagonists lock horns, the complex question as to whether the formerly dominant overseas empires improved the lot of their millions of subjects has disappeared from view. It is much easier to stick to the current academic orthodoxy which insists that empires were per se "bad things". And there would be some sense in this: ask the Chinese subjects of the Japanese empire or the Ethiopians who spent a few years under Mussolini's rule.

Empires were not all driven by the same values. The British and French boasted a moral reciprocity by which submission was rewarded with civil peace and the chance to share the benefits of the European enlightenment. Their empires were sustained by local collaborators who manned administrations. More importantly, there were large numbers of imperial subjects who welcomed what their rulers offered. A blind man whose sight was restored by a French surgeon in Morocco would have been puzzled by the current furore. Anarchy has never accelerated human progress and empires did bring stability to regions that had hitherto lacked them.

MENU

Search



Comment

suppression of resistance. History is thus reduced to a crude balance sheet in which the opening of teaching hospitals in India is set against the Amritsar massacre.

Two fundamental tasks of the historian are to explain why people behaved in the ways they did and what they hoped to accomplish. These investigations are hindered by catcalls and demands to smother opinions (and conclusions) which do not fit contemporary political dogma. Retrospective moral posturing places history in a straitjacket and skews our understanding of the past.



PREVIOUS ARTICLE

'Past-it' food is best idea since wonky veg

NEXT ARTICLE

Fudge Pudding



Lawrence James is the author of Empires in the Sun: The Struggle for the Mastery of Africa

Europe

Share   

Save 

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

0 comments

Comment

+ FOLLOW

POST COMMENT

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended



▲ BACK TO TOP

GET IN TOUCH

Contact us

Help

The Times Editorial Complaints

The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints

Place an announcement

Classified advertising

Display advertising

The Times corrections

The Sunday Times corrections

MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

The Times e-paper

The Sunday Times e-paper

Times Currency Services

The Sunday Times Wine Club

Encounters Dating

Times Print Gallery

Times Crossword Club

Sunday Times Driving

Times+

The Sunday Times Rich List

Insider City Guides

Good University Guide

Schools Guide

The Brief

Best Places to Live

Best Places to Stay

Comment

[Privacy & cookie policy](#)

[Syndication](#)

[Commissioning Terms](#)

[Terms and conditions](#)

