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# Don't feel guilty about our colonial history

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Apologising for empire is now compulsory but shame can stop us tackling the world's problems



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**F**or the last 100 years, western colonialism has had a bad name. It is high time to question this orthodoxy.” So opens “The Case for Colonialism”, an article by Bruce Gilley, a political scientist at Portland State University, which appeared in September’s issue of the journal *Third World Quarterly*.

Predictably, a perfect storm of protest erupted. As Gilley tells it, 15 of the 34 members of *TWQ*’s editorial board resigned, two petitions demanding a retraction gathered over 16,000 signatures, fellow academics accused him of promoting “white supremacy”, and the editor eventually withdrew the essay under death threats from Indian nationalists, though it survives on the author’s own website.

What provoked this fury of indignation? Gilley is no simple imperialist. He doesn’t

deny that “inexcusable atrocities” occurred under European colonial rule. It’s just that he remembers that they also happened before the Europeans arrived and after they left. With Zimbabwe on our minds, we might remember that the massacre of up to 20,000 Ndebele in Zimbabwe in 1983-4 was perpetrated, not by the British but by that patriarch of African nationalism Robert Mugabe. “The notion that colonialism is always and everywhere a bad thing,” Gilley writes, “needs to be rethought in light of the grave human toll of a century of anti-colonial regimes and policies.”

Among the virtues of colonial rule, as Gilley sees them, were often the formation of coherent political communities, reliable state institutions and therefore living-spaces where individuals and their families could flourish.

In support, Gilley calls a most unlikely witness: Chinua Achebe, Nigerian novelist and anti-colonialist hero. In his final work, *There Was a Country*, published the year before he died in 2013, Achebe wrote: “Here is a piece of heresy. The British governed their colony of Nigeria with considerable care. There was a very highly competent cadre of government officials imbued with a high level of knowledge of how to run a country . . . British colonies were, more or less, expertly run.”

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One of colonial rule’s most valuable achievements was order. “One was not consumed by fear of abduction or armed robbery,” Achebe recalled. “One had a great deal of confidence and faith in British institutions.” While British justice might have been fierce, it could not be bought or sold. “Now,” he lamented, “all that is changed.”

Political order might seem like a very unexciting value, but without it nothing good can flourish. That’s why indigenous peoples sometimes chose to move into territories governed by colonial regimes, rather than away from them. Thus millions of Chinese took refuge in British Hong Kong during the early years of communist rule in Beijing, and especially the anarchy of the Cultural Revolution. What gave colonial rule popular legitimacy was not democratic elections but its provision of the goods of security and the rule of law.

So while decrying the way in which colonialism had robbed indigenous peoples of the habit of self-rule, Achebe didn’t call for the wholesale repudiation of the colonial legacy. Instead he urged creative, discriminate appropriation. Interviewed in 2012 by Iranian journalists, who were pressing him to condemn western colonialism, he

insisted: “The legacy of colonialism is not a simple one but one of great complexity, with contradictions — good things as well as bad.”

Gilley’s courageous call for a balanced reappraisal of the colonial past is certainly important for the formerly colonised; but it’s also important for the former colonisers. For as we British read our past, so we understand ourselves; and as we understand ourselves, so we act in the future. If we believe what strident anti-colonialists tell us — namely, that our imperial past was one long, unbroken litany of oppression, exploitation and self-deception — then our guilt will make us vulnerable to wilful manipulation, and it will confirm us in the belief that the best way we can serve the world is by leaving it well alone.

If on the other hand we recognise that the history of the British Empire was morally mixed, just like that of any nation state, then pride can temper shame. Pride at the Royal Navy’s century-long suppression of the Atlantic slave trade, for example, will not be entirely obscured by shame at the slaughter of innocents at Amritsar in 1919. And while we might well be moved to think with care about how to intervene abroad successfully, we won’t simply abandon the world to its own devices.

The costs, errors and uncertain results of our recent adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan have rightly chastened us. Part of what they should teach us, however, is that successful intervention requires more, earlier. Many Iraqis rejoiced at the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s atrocious regime but were disillusioned at the invaders’ subsequent failure to impose order.

Considering Britain’s unwarranted guilt over its alleged betrayal of the Arabs during and after the First World War, the historian Elie Kedourie wrote: “No doubt, great powers do commit great crimes, but a great power is not always and necessarily in the wrong; and the canker of imaginary guilt even the greatest power can ill withstand”.

Bruce Gilley’s case for colonialism calls for us British to moderate our post-imperial guilt.

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