

Threats of violence the modern way to muffle free speech

Tom Whipple

October 13, 2017

It was never going to be a quiet addition to post-colonial literature. “For the last 100 years Western colonialism has had a bad name,” began Bruce Gilley, a political-science professor from Portland State University. “It is high time to question this orthodoxy.”

Over the next 6000 words his academic paper in *Third World Quarterly* argued not only that colonial rule was beneficial and legitimate, not only that subsequent independence had created a “cesspool of human suffering”, but also that Western rule should be reintroduced in the developing world.

The Case for Colonialism led to the resignation of half the journal’s editors. Retracted this week, it created a row just as intense, because the stated reason was not quality, but “serious and credible threats of personal violence” against the publisher.

Amid accusations of intolerance on US campuses, this retraction has been taken by some as another sign that free speech is under threat. Jonathan Haidt, professor of ethical leadership at New York University’s Stern School of Business, said argument itself was being closed down, and that the appropriate way to object to an academic paper should always be to write another in response. “Retraction is the new rebuttal, and threats of violence against journal editors is the new way to get a retraction,” he said.

John K Wilson, who writes for *Academe* magazine, said it was a dangerous precedent. “There’s a real danger when we give in to death threats, whether it’s cancelling speakers or censoring publications. The obvious danger is to free expression but it also creates a greater incentive to threaten.”

Gilley’s paper was not lacking in people prepared to rebut it. He argued that “anti-colonialist ideology” had created “100 years of disaster” in which governance had degenerated and millions had suffered. “The people of Bangladesh will have to wait another 244 years at their current rate

to reach a high-capacity state,” he wrote. “Would it have taken Britain until the middle of the 23rd century to institute good government in this former province of eastern Bengal?”

His solution? Modern-day Livingstones, arriving at the behest of the modern-day natives. Just as the “Sultan of Brunei installed an English traveller, James Brooke, as the rajah of his chaotic province of Sarawak in 1841”, so too could Western countries sponsor modern city states.

One academic from the Cato Institute called the paper a “bad joke”. Another, from Ohio University, said it ignored a “vast body of research” that showed the poor economic performance of colonies and the intense suffering of many of their people.

Vijay Prashad, from Trinity College, Connecticut, was one of 15 members of the journal’s editorial board who resigned in protest at its refusal to retract the article, claiming it failed “to meet academic standards of rigour and balance”. However, he said yesterday, it should have been removed because of its poor quality, not threats. “I’m very upset when any debates around ideas are brought into the realm of violence. It’s tragic. But this happens routinely and daily. I get death threats every three to four days for writing various things. But we don’t pull everything we write for such threats.

“The piece was very poorly put together. For a piece that recognises — unless he was living under a rock — that it is entering controversial territory, you’d have thought the author would have crossed all the t’s and dotted all the i’s. But this was a poor-quality, undergraduate-standard paper, with a sniff of white supremacy.”

Even before the retraction, Gilley had himself called for its withdrawal, saying: “I regret the pain and anger it has caused for many people.”