

May 2019

A Critique of Bruce Gilley's "The Case for Colonialism"

Ernest M. Oleksy
Cleveland State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr>



Part of the [Comparative Politics Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Recommended Citation

Oleksy, Ernest M.. "A Critique of Bruce Gilley's "The Case for Colonialism"." *The Downtown Review*. Vol. 5. Iss. 2 (2019) .

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr/vol5/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Downtown Review by an authorized editor of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

Gilley's article misses the overall damage that colonialism has caused. His two central arguments are that colonialism is an objective good, deduced from a cost-benefit analysis (CBA), and that it is subjectively legitimate (Robinson, p. 2). In terms of an objective good, Gilley cited Abernethy's CBA where he argues that colonialism positively contributed to self-governance and better standards of living. He also cites Juan and Pierskalla who argue that colonialism led to modern benefits like more education and better healthcare (Gilley, p. 2-4). The argument for the subjective legitimacy of colonialism is primarily explained in his critique of the reflexive, not reasoned, nature of the Academic Left, Gilley's primary target (Robinson, p. 6).

Gilley presents Cabral's Guinea-Bissau revolution as an example of African horror stories arising from anti-colonialism. He uses a CBA by saying that the Portuguese colonizers exhibited evidence of modern development, like increased food production and life expectancy (Gilley, p. 5). However, Gilley fails to mention that the Portuguese practiced assimilation and slavery-like practices. Portuguese colonies also experienced white settlements, resulting in displaced locals who were sent to other African countries to work in jobs like mining (Potter et al. pp. 75-76).

Gilley's gerrymandering CBA ignores the costs of colonialism to get a moral reaction from the Left (Robinson, p. 7). However, costs like the urban bias are embedded in colonialism; for instance, Ghana received unequal medical advances as a result of teaching hospitals aiding only 1% of its population (Potter et al, p. 79). Furthermore, Gilley rewrites history by only considering the early 19th and mid-20th centuries of colonialism, whereas the previous 300 years of colonialism were much more harmful, such as the genocide in the Americas (Robinson, p. 3).

A strong critique of the CBA approach is the case of the Congo, where Leopold's colonialism led to an exploitative labor camp that extracted raw resources from the colony for Leopold's consumption (Potter, p. 75). Quotas were so stringent that persons who did not abide by them were threatened with the dismembered limbs of loved ones (Robinson, p. 4). The aforementioned case of Congo demonstrates how colonialism's lack of regard for human rights, freedom, and sovereignty are ignored in Gilley's CBA (Robinson, pp. 2-3).

Gilley's next claim is that colonialism is subjectively legitimate. One argument Gilley uses to develop this thesis is that British colonialism in Kenya prevented civil war (Gilley p. 3). To refute: British colonialism in Kenya saw white settlers pushing local Kenyans out of land supplies by claiming 18% of the country's best agricultural land (Potter et al. p. 69).

Gilley's examples of voluntary participation in colonial militaries and utilizing colonial hospitals is laughable as it suggests that any state which imposes totalitarian control over another and implements its institutions has received

consent from the colonized; in reality it is coerced compliance (Robinson, p. 6). Gilley's more fundamental argument of countries being subjectively better-off after colonialism is also unfounded when observing the stark difference between the average HDI score of 0.711 and Niger's score of 0.348, which was a former colony in the Global South (Potter et al, pp. 18; 35).

Gilley then closes by recommending recolonization, bringing up Cambodia as an example of a successful national resurrection due to a regime inspired by a colonial past (Gilley, p. 10). However, Cambodia's new government was very autocratic and exploited land and raw resources, much like the French colonial style (Potter et al, p. 75). He then offers Galinhas as a potential home for a European, colonial state (Gilley, p.11). His pro-colonial arguments could be easily replaced by less intrusive imperialism instead, as such a system would allow for political and economic control without necessitating a settlement, as recolonization would (Potter et al, p. 53).

References

- Gilley, B. (2017). The case for colonialism. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037>
- Potter, R. B., Binns, T., Elliott, J. A., Nel, E. L., & Smith, D. W. (2018). *Geographies of development: An introduction to development studies*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Robinson, N. J. (2017, September 14). A Quick Reminder of Why Colonialism Was Bad. Retrieved from <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/09/a-quick-reminder-of-why-colonialism-was-bad>