Can the Academy Still Debate 'Colonialism'?

https://www.e-ir.info/2023/02/10/can-the-academy-still-debate-colonialism/

ALARIC SEARLE, FEB 10 2023

Among the most contested and debated issues in the humanities today is that of 'colonialism'. Its borders intersect international relations, gender studies, history, politics, literature, and even internal university policies. Indicative of the passions which the subject generates is the case of an article published in the journal, *Third World Quarterly* (*TWQ*), by an American Professor of Political Science at Portland State University, Bruce Gilley, entitled 'The Case for Colonialism' (Gilley, 2017/2018). The controversy erupted after the accusation was levelled that the usual conventions of peer review had not been adhered to. According to Gilley, after rejection by one journal 'for fear of political backlash', it was rejected by editors of a special issue of *TWQ*, then resubmitted as a standard article; it received one positive and one negative review. The editor decided to run the piece under the rubric of 'Viewpoint' (Gilley, 2022).

In the ensuing white heat of controversy which exploded on social media only a few minutes after initial publication online, three separate online petitions for the article to be retracted gained momentum. Thereafter, half the editorial board resigned in protest, the editor went, and then, finally, following death threats to the editorial board, Gilley agreed with the editors that the article should be withdrawn, but with a note remaining on the journal's website indicating the withdrawal was due to 'serious and credible threats of personal violence'. He also remarked that the journal was still happy to rack up hits for the withdrawal notice (Anon., 2017; Dawes, 2017; Gilley, 2022; Murray, 2022; Prashad, 2017). Death threats, torrents of abuse, and much more, suggest that the *TWQ* piece provoked something way beyond the usual reactions in an academic controversy.

The purpose of this article is not to reflect on philosophical questions of freedom of speech, much less to consider in detail the merits or demerits of Gilley's arguments, as this has already been done elsewhere (Young, 2019). It is rather to ask the question whether the reaction to Gilley's article differs from previous high-profile academic controversies which have been more than simply minor spats in the pages of journals, in other words, those which spilled out into the public square and occurred over highly controversial interpretations of history, politics and international relations. To answer this question, we shall examine three previous (vitriolic) disputes, suitably separated in time, and which were ignited by: A.J.P. Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961); Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996); and, Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit's 2020 article criticising the Copenhagen School in the journal *Security Dialogue* (*SD*).

Before considering these cases, we need to return to the *TWQ* article briefly. The first point to be made is that the charge of poor scholarship is tinged with the suspicion that, at least in the case of some of the thousands who signed one of the three petitions, their objection was to Gilley's line of reasoning and, presumably, the type of language employed. The article was not an 'original contribution' in the sense of one founded on empirical research. Rather as the 'Viewpoint' rubric suggested, it was a broad sweep essay, possibly even written to be deliberately 'eye-catching'. The charge of an unacademic piece is much harder to substantiate: the essay listed just under one-hundred items in the bibliography; Gilley has also authored two previous articles in *TWQ*, as well as other contributions and two books dealing with specific aspects of colonialism.

Some critics may not have got beyond the final sentence of the abstract: 'Colonialism can be recovered by weak and fragile states today in three ways: by reclaiming colonial modes of governance; by recolonising some areas; and by creating new Western colonies from scratch.' Given that colonialism is often associated with Western powers' rule in

Africa and Asia from the mid-1800s to the 1950s, it might be a stretch to imagine that the previous forms of government which conducted colonial policies could somehow be 'revived'. Gilley does, nonetheless, state that colonialism 'can return… only with the consent of the colonised.' He proceeds with some controversial positions on three 'failures of anti-colonial critique'. The next weapon in his armoury is to point to the costs of anti-colonialism, which is another way of raising the issue of failed states. His case for 'recolonisation' is, in fact, as much an argument for targeted international development work and autonomous economic zones (often referred to as 'charter cities') inside struggling third world countries (Gilley, 2017: 11). While there is plenty that many IR scholars would disagree with, his arguments do stimulate thought on a range of issues, not least of all what is meant by 'colonialism'. In fact, if some instances of his use of the 'C-word' had been replaced by alternative terms, one suspects that the article might have caused less controversy and the central arguments would have remained completely intact.

The criticism levelled at his 'pro-colonialism arguments' have been dealt with in considerable detail by Gilley himself in a recent article, so there is no need to repeat these here (Gilley, 2022). The focus of this investigation is different. It is the significance of the attacks on his scholarship, academic reputation, career, the withdrawal of the original article and the widespread calls not to download it. This is the background against which previous controversies will be considered with a view to answering the question as to whether attempts to silence a fellow academic are something new in the academy.

The Taylor Controversy (1961-71)

The most famous historical dispute of the twentieth century occurred in 1961 with the publication of the book*The Origins of the Second World War* by the historian A.J.P. Taylor. Written very much in the provocative style with which Taylor was to become associated, it was in essence a crossover between an essay and a research monograph. Referencing across significant sections of the book was sparse, even though by this point in his career Taylor was an accomplished diplomatic historian. To recapitulate some of the arguments: Hitler was simply an opportunist in foreign policy; he had goals, but no masterplan as to how he could achieve them; his aims were no different to Stresemann during the Weimar Republic; the Munich Agreement in 1938 was a perfectly reasonable response by Western politicians to a difficult and taxing crisis; and, the German had dictator blundered into war, partly due to the mistakes of British and French politicians (Burk, 2000: 280-295; Taylor, 1961).

Particularly instructive is an introductory chapter, entitled 'Second Thoughts', which appeared as a preface to the paperback edition of 1964. Taylor's response to his critics noted that Hitler had not forced the Austrian crisis, it was Schuschnigg, nor had he dismembered Czechoslovakia, which had been accomplished by the British Government (Taylor, 1964: 7-27, here, 8). The thesis of Hitler as an opportunist was easier to pursue in 1961 as historians had only just begun to examine the mountains of documents left behind by the National Socialist movement and the German state. Taylor himself noted much later the 'paucity' of documents, even if he had been through some of the diplomatic correspondence, which made 'my book a period piece of limited value' (Burk, 2000: 281). Nonetheless, his critics were left with little choice but to point out that in Taylor's world there was little connection between foreign policy and political movements or ideologies. It was obvious, too, even at the time he was writing, that the drive for *Lebensraum* was a long-standing factor in Hitler's foreign policy (Mason, 1964).

Many leading historians took Taylor to task for his view of 'historical events caused by accident'. F.H. Hinsley made the rather obvious point that long-range planning does not necessarily include a precise timetable for every step necessary to accomplish the desired goals. Others chastised him for ignoring Hitler's speeches and *Mein Kampf*. Only a decade and a half after the end of the war, the thesis of the dictator blundering into war seemed to challenge the verdicts in Nuremberg. Yet, despite this, professional criticism in the pages of academic journals, such as*Past & Present*, *History* and *Historical Review* (Cole, 1971; Robertson, 1971) did not descend into personal abuse, although the controversy did spread 'beyond the academy', including a television debate between Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper. There was, moreover, a political motive behind the thesis of accidental war: the threat of nuclear weapons was starting to loom. Taylor was acutely aware of this (Burk, 2000: 282-6).

The Goldhagen Controversy (1996-2000)

Hitler's Willing Executioners (Goldhagen, 1996) seemed to take the opposite view to Taylor. In what was his first book (at that time he was an Associate Professor of Political Science at Harvard University), Daniel Goldhagen argued that the majority of Germans involved in the elimination of the Jews during the Second World War were motivated by a long-standing anti-Semitism which had, essentially, prepared them for the Holocaust. This anti-Jewish attitude was peculiar to German identity and had evolved over several centuries. Many of his arguments were easy to attack due to the three-and-a-half decades of research conducted on the Holocaust since the publication of Taylor's work. While the book was a publishing success due to its provocative thesis, attracting extensive commentary and analysis in journals (Rieger, 1997; Hilberg, 1997; Körner, 2000), it did generate widespread disdain among historians of the Holocaust, even if some Jewish historians came to its author's defence (Gutman, 1998).

One notable aspect of Goldhagen's book was that it was in part a response to the path-breaking work,*Ordinary Men* (Browning, 1992). Goldhagen had studied the documents relating to the same Police Battalion as Christopher Browning had, but had reached very different conclusions. The latter had attributed the behaviour of ordinary German policemen to a variety of elements, such as pre-war propaganda, fear of showing weakness to fellow soldiers, a variety of situational factors, and German obsequiousness in the face of hierarchies. The two historians participated in a discussion on the subject in April 1996. The proceedings of the symposium held at the United States Holocaust Museum noted that controversy was healthy, not for its own sake, but in the pursuit of truth. It was recalled that a previous exchange between Goldhagen and Browning had seen an 'intellectual engagement [which] was civil and appropriate'. At the symposium, Browning had commented, 'directly, forcefully and civilly' (Berenbaum, 1996: ii-iii), even if Goldhagen was later accused of intemperate responses to his critics (Goldhagen, 1998; Birn, 1998).

The *Security Dialogue* Controversy (2020-21)

A more recent example of academic fisticuffs occurred when two IR specialists, Howell and Richter-Montpetit, published an article in the IR journal, *Security Dialogue*. First appearing online in 2019, it launched a full-scale broadside against the Copenhagen School, claiming indirectly its founders were racist. The two IR theorists who launched the critique of the ideas of the Copenhagen School's founders, Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, are mid-career academics: Alison Howell, an Associate Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University, published her first book entitled *Madness in International Relations* (Howell, 2011) while still a postdoc, and just under a decade before the *SD* article; Melanie Richter-Montpetit, a Senior Lecturer at the University of Sussex, has authored theoretical pieces on IR and co-authored a book (e-IR, 2017).

The thesis itself was that the Copenhagen School was founded on racism, 'anti-blackness', with the supporters of securitization theory portrayed as defenders of (white) civilized politics against (racialized) primal anarchy. While the authors reassured the reader that the article was 'not a personal indictment of any particular author', racism was a 'system of power' which was evident in Buzan and Waever's theory, itself a product of 'methodological whiteness' (Howell/Richter-Montpetit, 2020). The article attracted a range of criticisms, with the objects of the attack retorting that the thesis was based on a 'deep-fake methodology'. Significantly, Buzan and Waever disputed that they had not been labelled 'racist' (which they thought 'libellous'), not surprisingly given that one of their texts was at the centre of the main argument (Buzan, et al., 1998). They also criticised the journal for restricting them to a 4,000-word reply which they considered inadequate, publishing a longer response elsewhere (Buzan/Waever, 2020).

It would be easy to dismiss the 'debate' as a storm in a teacup. With a few exceptions in the blogosphere (Hayes, 2020), it never really extended beyond the pages of the journal (Hansen, 2020; Coleman, 2021), even if a special issue on the broad subject area was published the following year. Likewise, the critique was somewhat undermined by Buzan's recent contribution to the calls for a new 'global IR' as part of a 'post-Western world order' (Buzan/Acharya, 2019). Despite the limited impact of the *SD* controversy, the claim of Howell/Richter-Montpetit that their accusations were not directed at any particular individual seems disingenuous, even if there were no calls for doctorates to be revoked.

Conclusion

Taking the Taylor, Goldhagen, *SD* and Gilley controversies together, do they tell us anything about the debate on

colonialism in the early 2020s, or about contemporary academic culture in general? To return to the original question – is the Gilley case different to the three other controversies examined? In the first instance, let us consider the similarities. All four cases, which extend over a sixty-year period, clearly led to discussions in the pages of academic journals, with the charge of poor scholarship levelled in each case. At the core of each debate was a specific controversial interpretation of contentious subject matter, regardless of the fact that the two recent cases were over articles, the previous two over books. The respective seniority of the authors does not seem to have played a significant role: Taylor and Gilley were senior professors at the time of their debates, Goldhagen an early career scholar, whereas Howell/Richter-Montpetit are mid-career researchers.

The most extensive and far-reaching controversies occurred over Taylor and Goldhagen's books; yet the basic unwritten rules of academic disputation were adhered to; there was on the whole little personal abuse; both authors' theses were challenged robustly; critics did attack the scholarship of both works; and the conflict spilled out into the press. In the case of the *SD* controversy, the language used was 'borderline' as the targets of the original piece were at least implied to be 'racists' on the basis of their theories rather than any evidence of racist behaviour or language; and, *SD* refused to allow an adequate response from those who had been attacked, somewhat ironic given the word 'dialogue' in the journal's title.

While elements from the three controversies can be observed in the case of the Gilley *TWQ* article– questioning of the scholarship and the controversy moving outside academia – there are clear differences. There was the successful use of intimidation to have the 'offending piece' removed from the pages of *TWQ*; a call for Princeton University to revoke Gilley's PhD; the cancellation of his co-editorship of a series by the publishers Rowman and Littlefield; an official 'censure' of his work, based on the citation of critics that his work had been 'discredited' by the scholarly community; open calls for scholars not to download the article or click on the DOI or URL (Gilley, 2022: 125-6). Despite the employment of the term 'colonialism' when other concepts might have equally served his thesis, the reaction can be characterised as a departure from previous norms of scholarly debate.

Placing the *TWQ* article in the context of academic enquiry since 1945, the aggressive response to it raises some serious questions about how IR controversies will be debated in the coming decades. The refusal of the thousands of critics to respond to the article by arguing against it in print, or, using it as a point of departure to consider the phenomenon of colonialism, or as an opportunity to reflect on terminology, and to substitute robust debate for abuse on Twitter, suggests an erosion of the traditional norms of academic discussion. It could be argued that this could also be seen in the *SD* controversy, most notably the refusal of the journal to give Buzan and Waever the space to respond in a full-length article. But, overall, the Gilley case does seem to indicate the emergence of a trend towards the refusal to challenge an opponent's views at length in print.

Disagreeing vehemently with another scholar's opinions in the academy is one thing, death threats and calls for a scholar to be fired quite another. Since the inception of the discipline of International Relations, IR scholars have engaged in big debates about big issues (McCarthy, 2009). But, thus far, there has been little to no discussion about *how* debates have been conducted. Textbooks on IR theory examine multiple approaches, methodologies, and subject matter, although – interestingly – 'colonialism' as a problem in IR theory is often conspicuous by its absence (Burchill, et al, 2009; Weber, 2009; Jørgensen, 2010; Viotti, et al., 2014). While textbooks invariably accept that IR/Security is a 'contested field' (Dalby, 1997: 6), there has been complete silence about the *conventions* and *style* of debates. But if IR is the science it claims to be, then open debate is essential to its future. The case of the Gilley controversy raises fundamental issues which need to be debated in a scholarly fashion.

References

Anon. (2017). 'Third World Quarterly and the case for colonialism debate', 14.12.2017, https://aidnography.blogspot.com/2017/12/third-world-quarterly-case-for-colonialism-curated-overview-debate-critique.html.

Berenbaum, Michael (1996). 'Introduction'. In Goldhagen, Daniel, Browning, Christopher R., and Leon Wieseltier. The "Willing Executioners" / "Ordinary Men" Debate, Symposium held at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, April 8, 1996, i-iii. Washington DC: ISHMM.

Birn, Ruth Bettina (1998). 'Ruth Bettina Birn Answers Goldhagen', *German Politics & Society*, 16(2): 69-87.

Browning, Christopher (1992). *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* , New York: HarperCollins.

Burchill, Scott, et al. (2009). *Theories of International Relations*, Fourth edn, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Burk, Kathleen (2000). *Troublemaker: The Life and History of A.J.P. Taylor*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Buzan, Barry, et al. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: CO: Lynne Reiner.

Buzan, Barry, and Amitav Acharya (2019). *The Making of Global International Relations: Origins and Evolution of IR at its Centenary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Buzan, Barry, and Ole Waever (2020). 'Racism and responsibility – The critical limits of deep fake methodology in Security Studies. A reply to Howell and Richter-Montpetit', *Security Dialogue*, 51(4): 386-94.

Cole, C. Robert (1971). 'Critics of the Taylor View of History'. In *The Origins of the Second World War*, ed. E.M. Robertson, 142-57. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan. *First published in 1968.*

Coleman, Lara Montesinos (2021). 'Racism! What do you mean? From Howell and Richter-Montpetit's underestimation of the problem, towards situating security through struggle', *Security Dialogue*, 52(1) (Supplement; November): 69-77. *This article was part of a special issue of the journal, entitled, 'Forum on Race and Racism in Critical Security Studies'.*

Dalby, Simon (1997). 'Contesting an Essential Concept: Reading the Dilemmas in Contemporary Security Discourse'. In: *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*, eds. Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, 3-31. London: UCL Press.

Dawes, Simon (2017). 'Open letter to Third World Quarterly on the publication of "The Case for Colonialism"', *openDemocracy*, 20.09.2017, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/open-letter-to-third-world-quarterly-on-publication-of-case-for-coloniali/

E-International Relations (2017). '10th Anniversary Interview – Melanie Richter-Montpetit', e-IR, 5 December 2017, https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/71862.

Gilley, Bruce (2017). 'Viewpoint: The Case for Colonialism', *Third World Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2017.1369037 (withdrawn). Published online, 8.09.2017.

Gilley, Bruce (2018). 'The Case for Colonialism', *Academic Questions*, 31 (Summer): 167-185.

Gilley, Bruce (2022). 'The Case for Colonialism: A Response to My Critics', *Academic Questions*, 35(1): 89-126.

Goldhagen, Daniel (1996). *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* , New York: Alfred A Knopf.

Goldhagen, Daniel (1998), 'Daniel Jonah Goldhagen Comments on Birn', *German Politics & Society*, 16(2): 88-93.

Gutman, Yisrael (1998). 'Goldhagen – His Critics and His Contribution', *Yad-Vashem Studies*, 26: 329-64.

Hansen, Lene (2020). 'Are "Core" Feminist Critiques of Securitization Theory Racist? A Reply to Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit', *Security Dialogue*, 51(4): 378-85.

Hayes, Jarrod (2020). 'It Isn't Just About Waever and Buzan', *The Duck of Minerva*, online at https://www.duckofminerva.com/2020/05/it-isnt-just-about-waever-and-buzan.html.

Hilberg, Raul (1997). 'The Goldhagen Phenomenon', *Critical Enquiry*, 23(4): 721-28.

Howell, Alison (2011). *Madness in International Relations: Psychology, Security, and the Global Governance of Mental Health*, London: Taylor and Francis.

Howell, Alison, and Melanie Richter-Montpetit (2020). 'Is Securitization Theory Racist? Methodological Whiteness, and Anti-Black Thought in the Copenhagen School', *Security Dialogue*, 51(1): 3-22.

Jørgensen, Erik Knud (2010). *International Relations Theory: A New Introduction*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Körner, Axel (2000). '"The Arrogance of Youth": A Metaphor for Social Change? The Goldhagen Debate in Germany as Generational Conflict', *New German Critique*, No. 80 (Spring-Summer): 59-76.

Mason, T.W. (1964). 'Some origins of the Second World War', *Past & Present*, 29(1): 67-87.

McCarthy, Niall (2009). 'A Critical Analysis of the "Great Debates" that Structured Traditional International Relations Theory', e-IR, 26 October 2009, https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/2570.

Murray, Douglas (2022). 'Uncancelled History. EP.02. Colonialism' [interview with Bruce Gilley], Nebulous Media, on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0HJV5BE294.

Prashad, Vijay (2017). 'Letter of resignation from members of the Editorial Board of Third World Quarterly', Facebook, 19.07.2017, https://www.facebook.com/vijay.prashad.5/posts/10214329816989010.

Rieger, Bernard (1997). '"Daniel in the Lion's Den?" The German Debate about Goldhagen's "Hitler's Willing Executioners"', *History Workshop Journal*, 43 (Spring): 226-33.

Robertson, E.M. (1971). 'Introduction'. In *The Origins of the Second World War: Historical Interpretations* , ed. E.M. Robertson, 1-35. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Taylor, A.J.P. (1961). *The Origins of the Second World War*, London: Hamish Hamilton.

Taylor, A.J.P. (1964). *The Origins of the Second World War*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Viotti, Paul R., and Mark V. Kauppi (2014). *International Relations Theory*, Fifth edn, Harlow: Pearson.

Weber, Cynthia (2009). *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Third edn, Abingdon: Routledge.

Young, Tom (2019). 'The Gilley "Debate"', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 57(2): 325-37.

About the author:

Alaric Searle is Professor of Modern European History at the School of Arts, Media and Creative Technology, University of Salford, United Kingdom, where he is Lead for the 'Area Studies' Research Group. Email: d.a.searle@salford.ac.uk.