

Editors' Introduction

With this edition, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* launches a new, invitation-only, 'Briefing' section. The section will feature critical commentary by leading voices in African Studies, broadly defined, on the most pressing issues of the day. By opening up this avenue, the journal aims to provide rigorous, yet readable, analyses that fall somewhere between a review essay and a fully-fledged academic paper. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the emergent discursive milieu around the study of the continent. Featured periodically, material published in the section will be scholarly, engaged, even polemical; yet not overly dense. The aim is to reach out to the community of scholars spread across the length and breadth of the social sciences in Africa, Euro-America, and indeed the rest of the world.

For the inaugural issue, we feature International Relations scholar Tom Young's analysis of the fallouts from the publication of Portland State University political scientist Bruce Gilley's controversial article, 'The Case for Colonialism in Africa' which appeared in *Third World Quarterly* (2017). As is well-known, reaction across the African Studies community to the article's main thesis that 'Western colonialism was, as a general rule, both objectively beneficial and subjectively legitimate in most of the places where it was found, using realistic measures of those concepts' was almost uniformly negative. Responses were understandably emotional, given the thesis that Gilley advanced. A cross section of scholars demanded (successfully) a retraction of the piece by TWQ. Another demand, that Gilley issue an apology for the article, was less successful. In retrospect, it would seem that the opportunity the article presented for a wider debate on the colonial project – its complex cultural, ethical, political and socio-economic ramifications, and its continued impact on scholarship and policy discourses on Africa – was missed.

In light of this, we had tasked Dr Young, not with a standard rebuttal, but an intervention that, taking the Gilley article as its initial provocation, uses its by no means original position (see for instance arguments advanced elsewhere by the historians Niall Ferguson and Michael Ignatieff, and foreign affairs analyst Robert D. Kaplan); and the furore triggered by it, as a moment to reflect on nagging issues in the African colonial experience, African historiography, post-colonial politics, and perennial, if intractable, epistemological and philosophical questions and debates on the status of the past itself.

While Young easily disqualifies Gilley's central idea as incoherent and untenable, his ultimate interest is less in Gilley per se, and more in other critical issues in the immediate and seemingly distant vicinity of the 'debate'. Accordingly, in a bracingly well-written essay in which few turns are left unstoned, Dr Young

ranges over topics as diverse – and seemingly disaffiliated – as free speech and the liberal tradition, safe spaces and trigger warnings, toleration, higher education, NGOs and the colonial legacy in Africa. Young's ultimate point is that those who (no doubt legitimately) rejected and denounced Gilley's claims are often the same people who argue for a de facto liberal interventionism in Africa, or what some scholars style as neocolonialism. This is something we can all reflect upon. We hope JMAS readers are exercised and enlightened in equal measure by this first Briefing.

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