

The Colonialism Slander in the State Department and Beyond



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Peter Berkowitz

COMMENTARY

Left-wing intellectuals have transformed the complex history of “colonialism” into an all-encompassing slander against the West. A practice dating back to the ancient world, colonialism involves a nation’s transferring a portion of its population into a foreign land and assuming responsibility for administering it. In the United Kingdom and the United States, professors of literature, history, political theory, and international relations routinely teach that the subjugation of non-Western peoples belongs to the essence of the West – they primarily mean the British Empire, America, and Israel. The anti-colonialists further contend that the perpetration of heinous crimes – including genocide, the systematic effort to wipe out a people – belongs to the essence of the West’s colonialism.

So successful have the professors been in promulgating the belief that the West has engaged in centuries of relentlessly brutal conquest and malevolent domination that the colonialism slander has found its way into the U.S. State Department bureaucracy. In a Nov. 3 scoop, Axios reporters Hans Nichols and Barak Ravid revealed that “A junior State Department employee who is organizing a dissent cable on the White House’s policy on Israel has used social media to publicly accuse President Biden of being ‘complicit in genocide’ toward the people of Gaza.” The dissent cable, which involves classified communications to the secretary of state, has been leaked.

An organizer of the dissent cable and author of the accusation that the president whom she serves is complicit in genocide, Sylvia Yacoub is “a foreign affairs officer in the Bureau of Middle East Affairs for more than two years.” The obscene abuse of the term “genocide” to characterize Israel’s exercise of its right of self-defense is a tell-tale sign that Yacoub subscribes to the colonialism slander. Had she described the jubilantly executed atrocities and proudly proclaimed goal of the Hamas jihadists as genocide, she would have employed the term correctly.

The colonialism slander blinds its adherents to basic facts and crucial distinctions. On Oct. 7, in grotesque violation of the laws of war, the terrorists massacred some 1,200, mostly civilians, and abducted 240, mostly civilians, in furtherance of their oft-repeated aim to destroy the Jewish state. In contrast, and in compliance with the laws of war, Israel has targeted Hamas combatants and their military infrastructure. Before attacking Hamas strongholds, which the terrorists illegally built inside and under Gaza’s cities, Israel has

warned Palestinian civilians to leave and has directed them to safe areas. The tragic loss of civilian life in Gaza has resulted from Hamas' callous conversion of civilian areas into war zones.

It turns out, according to Eitan Fischberger, that Yacoub, a 2023 graduate of Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service (SFS), "wrote her thesis paper about colonialism and its role in international relations." In "[The Georgetown Effect](#)," Fischberger explained that Yacoub's thesis reflected her school's priorities: "SFS's curriculum, faculty viewpoints, and campus activities" revolve around colonialism and "decolonization." Josh Paul, the only State Department official to resign in opposition to the Biden administration's support for Israel's war against Hamas, graduated from SFS in 2002.

In the 2023 British Sunday Times bestseller "Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning," Nigel Biggar provides a meticulous accounting of colonialism and the West. A professor emeritus of moral and pastoral theology at the University of Oxford, Biggar writes that in late 2017, he was "plunged into the 'culture war' over colonialism." Shortly after publishing an exploration in The Times of London of colonialism's contributions as well as its costs, "all hell broke loose." Critics targeted for termination his scholarly project "Ethics and Empire," his distinguished partner resigned from the enterprise, and nearly 200 scholars from around the world denounced him in one [online statement](#), as did 58 Oxford colleagues in [another](#). Biggar responded in exemplary fashion by producing an incisive scholarly study – some 300 pages of closely argued text and 130 pages of learned endnotes – examining "the complicated, morally ambiguous truth" about the British Empire's colonialism.

Biggar emphasizes that the "unscrupulous indifference to truth" displayed by the anti-colonialists – for whom the late Edward Said, a Columbia University professor of literature, is a quasi-prophet and his "Orientalism" a quasi-bible – reveals that their slanders serve a political function: the diminution of the West. "One important way of corroding faith in the West is to denigrate its record, a major part of which is the history of European empires," observes Biggar. "And of all those empires, the primary target is the British one, which was by far the largest and gave birth to the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand."

Biggar's "moral assessment" of the British Empire's colonialism – which stretches from before 1600 and the creation of the East India Company to the empire's post-World War II dissolution – is informed by a species of Christian realism. He believes that basic moral principles are real and knowable; human beings are equal in dignity because they are "accountable for the spending of their lives to a God who looks with compassion upon their limitations and burdens"; cultures may be unequal in many respects; government, which is indispensable, rightly pursues the national interest despite its inevitable unjust acts; war can be necessary and just; and, "History contains an ocean of injustice, most of it unremedied and now lying beyond correction in this world."

In one long sentence, Biggar summarizes the evils – these encompass “not only culpable wrongdoing or injustice, but also unintended harms,” but do not include genocide – perpetrated by British colonialism. The debit side of the ledger comprises “brutal slavery; the epidemic spread of devastating disease; economic and social disruption; the unjust displacement of natives by settlers; failures of colonial government to prevent settler abuse and famine; elements of racial alienation and racist contempt; policies of needlessly wholesale cultural suppression; miscarriages of justice; instances of unjustifiable military aggression and the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force; and the failure to admit native talent to the higher echelons of colonial government on terms of equality quickly enough to forestall the build-up of nationalist resentment.”

In two sentences – one comparatively short and one extraordinarily long – Biggar distills the steps Britain undertook to mitigate colonialism’s shameful dimensions and the contributions of which it can be proud. “If the empire initially presided over the slave trade and slavery, it renounced both in the name of basic human equality and then led endeavors to suppress them worldwide for 150 years,” he maintains on the ledger’s positive side.

The empire also: moderated the disruptive impact of Western modernity upon very unmodern societies; promoted a worldwide free market that gave native producers and entrepreneurs new economic opportunities; created regional peace by imposing an overarching imperial authority on multiple, warring peoples; perforce involved representatives of native peoples in the lower levels of government; sought to relieve the plight of the rural poor and protect them against rapacious landlords; provided a civil service and judiciary that was generally and extraordinarily incorrupt; developed public infrastructure, albeit usually through private investment; made foreign investment attractive by reducing the risks through establishing political stability and the rule of law; disseminated modern agricultural methods and medicine; stood against German aggression – first militarist, then Nazi – and for international law and order in the two world wars, helping to save both the Western and the non-Western world for liberal democracy; brought up three of the most prosperous and liberal states now on earth – Canada, Australia and New Zealand; gave birth to two more – the United States and Israel; evolved into a loose, consensual, multi-racial, international organization, the (British) Commonwealth of Nations, which some states that never belonged to the British Empire have opted to join – Mozambique (1995) and Rwanda (2009); inspired by the ideal of the Commonwealth, helped to plan and realize first the League of Nations and then the United Nations; through the Commonwealth applied moral pressure to South Africa to abandon its policy of *apartheid*; through the wartime anti-fascist alliance of 1939–45, evolved into an important part of the post-war Western alliance against Soviet and Chinese communism; and still has a significant afterlife in the Western military alliance of NATO, the intelligence alliance of the “Five Eyes,” and influential economic development agencies such as the UK’s British International Investment and Department for International Development.

An admirable scholarly achievement, Biggar's rigorous assessment invites critical engagement. However, the very idea of carefully considering colonialism's contributions as well as its costs is anathema to the anti-colonialists. Their postmodern progressivism leaves little room for dissent from the dogma that colonialism was implacably racist and rapacious. For the anti-colonialists, the appeal to historical evidence and reasoned argument amounts to one more noxious feature of the colonial mindset. As Biggar observes in his epilogue, anti-colonialists embrace "the ideas that 'truth' is whatever the anti-colonialist revolution requires and that revolutionary vitality should be preferred to bourgeois reason."

The widespread colonialism slander undercuts U.S. diplomacy and enfeebls democracy in America. A crucial part of the remedy consists in cultivating professors who will engage in reasoned scholarship rather than partisan posturing and will reorient classrooms around education in, rather than indoctrination against, the West.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](https://peterberkowitz.com) and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.