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What is scholarship in these days of political and racial polarization? Can we even attempt the discussions scholarship must be based on?

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If It Looks Like Scholarship...

Aaron Barlow / 21 hours ago



Seymour Newlin, whose life Barlow's great-grandfather was unable to save.

BY AARON BARLOW

Dr. Bruce Gilley, are you trying to pick a fight?

You are a professor of Political Science at Portland State University and have penned a disturbing piece, "[Was It Good Fortune to be Enslaved by the British Empire?](#)" that appeared on September 30, 2019 on the website of the National Association of Scholars. As you know, NAS, though it sounds academic, is dedicated to

promoting a right-wing vision of intellectual discussions. And its Eurocentric framing, resting on so weak a foundation that it often seems about to teeter into white supremacy, certainly is open to discussion—but I don't want to fight about that. Not now.

In fact, I don't *really* want to fight you on any topic, Dr. Gilley. But I do want to resist the movement of the window of discourse you are pushing in this article. I feel personally invested in countering the argument you are putting forward. But feel that I am being drawn into a net of deception, one surrounding a topic that has affected the

very existence of our country. I am being forced by a variety of actors, including you, NAS and the growing white supremacist movement, to spend time and effort to push the window back. I don't like having to do that, and want to avoid the fight that sometimes ensues.

This is personal. Your argument in the NAS article affects me not only because we share Scottish heritage but because the questions of the questions of slavery and racism you touch on formed me and my American ancestors.

Four of my great-great-grandfathers fought for the Confederacy. One, captured during the Breakthrough at Petersburg on April 2, 1865 just days before Appomattox, refused to sign his name to release papers, simply inking an X when he left Point Lookout prison in Maryland in August to walk home to western North Carolina. He could have signed—he was literate (he became a postmaster after the war)—but he was not willing to give up allegiance to the Confederacy.

His grandson, though, served the *United States* in World War I and grew to hate the growing Lost Cause movement with its veneration of the war that had twisted the lives of both of his grandparents (his other one was invalidated out in late 1862 with a bullet in his skull that would remain there the rest of his life).

My grandfather married a woman who was the descendant of slave-owners. She grew up knowing former slaves.

Both of these grandparents were undoubtedly racist but, over time, they moved away from the attitudes of their parents and grandparents toward the Confederacy, African Americans, and the institution of slavery—I remember my grandfather pounding the table and declaring, “No one in this family will ever vote for George Wallace!” Their children grew up to be much more embracing and accepting of difference than their ancestors had been and were part of a generation that once seemed about to change the South though, looking back, they seem to have been a minority among their peers.

On the other side of my family, my great-grandfather, an Ohio sheriff, failed to stop the [lynching of Seymour Newlin](#) in 1894. Perhaps he should not be blamed, for the crowd was massive and his deputies few, but the fact remains: He failed to save a life and his descendants still grapple with that. His grandson, interested in the priesthood, approached an Episcopalian bishop while he was a student at Oberlin after returning from service in World War II. It came out that my father's roommate was African American. The bishop leaned close to him and asked, “Is it true that they smell?” My father fled, literally and figuratively, finally landing with the Quakers who have a long abolitionist and anti-racist tradition.

It's in part because of my family history (there is much more to it than I outline here—including a beating I received at the start of what the police would call a “race riot”)

that I teach for a college whose student population is dominated by minorities.

Out of respect to my family and its past, I want to be among a movement toward inclusion and acceptance, one that includes even white folk but that is not dominated by them.

I also want to reach out to other whites, ones also with family backgrounds supporting the racism of the United States but whose conclusions, like yours, differ from mine. I don't want to fight with them—or with you—but want to ask all of you to step back from belligerence and forward into discussion.

As I grew up in the fifties and sixties, amid turmoil created by slavery and racism, I have strong feelings on the topic. I do not think I should hide my own anger at those who attempt to reduce the horror of our collective past—but I do believe I should be willing to step aside from it and talk. I hope you can, too.

First, though, I want to discuss scholarship. After all, you are a professor and NAS considers itself a scholarly endeavor. As I, too, am part of the academic community, I want to get my concerns with this out of the way before we engage with other concerns.

Let me ask you, Professor Gilley, what makes scholarship? I can't give a clear answer even for myself, not for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Would you agree that, if a work has at least one of the hallmarks of scholarship—a review of the literature perhaps, footnotes, peer review, an appropriate venue, or a credentialed author—we generally accept it as scholarship? For me, the key element to scholarship is also something else, a particular and focused purpose.

Would you agree? Could we agree that, baldly stated, this purpose of scholarship is expansion of knowledge, personal and general? It is not simply expansion of debate, though that can be part of it. Debate concerns winning and losing while scholarship brings about increase for all.

When the goal is simply winning or convincing, the purported scholarship created in support becomes suspect; information and ideas are easily warped in service of a polemic. Scholarship needs to rise above that, with scholars themselves willing to be proven wrong by their own work and arguments. Debating does not foster that but is most often simply fighting, arguing to win, not to learn.

Scholars understand that each individual starts from a position of subjectivity, always searching for a position closer to the objective but never reaching it. True scholars are always willing to be wrong and they judge the worth of effort by the challenges raised to preconceived positions, and success by the changes in position thus necessitated.

Scholars don't set out only to prove their assumptions but to see where they are wrong.

Scholars are human, though, and cherish belief as much as anyone does, making it almost impossible to reach the goals they have set for their scholarship. A few even give up the struggle and become manipulators instead, producing work that looks scholarly but that is meant for political, not scholarly ends. Their work may become "performance scholarship." Though some of what they produce does serve a real scholarly purpose, much of it has other, generally political, ends.

Let me step back from that and turn to something else.

Your title is intentionally provocative. So, I wonder if you consider your essay a work of scholarship at all or simply extramural opinion. Asking what you do in that title, after all, is like an American soldier surveying Hiroshima in September 1945 and asking if the Nikkei-jin in the United States had greater luck, even with internment, than their cousins on the home island. Both questions beg real concerns surrounding the horrors of slavery and atomic warfare—and of the racism our nation continues to endure.

What is the real purpose of your title, Dr. Gilley? The best spin I can give it is that you are signaling that your article is not scholarship but provocation. That's fine, but why, then, are you dressing it up in some of the clothing of scholarship?

In your second paragraph, in discussing failed colonies in Nova Scotia, you write of the "Scottish king" of the 1620s. As you know, James VI of Scotland had become, also, James I of England on the death of his aunt Elizabeth I in 1603, almost two decades before the time you are considering. This Scottish king was also the English and British king. Why do you not call him that? Are you simply trying not to associate the Nova Scotia settlements you mention with the British empire? Maybe you are attempting to massage history rather than explore it. Or do you have another reason, unexplained, for limiting King James to Scotland?

The expeditions to you refer to, all small and ill-fated, stemmed from the inspiration of one man, William Alexander, the Earl of Stirling. Scholars John G. Reid and N. E. S. Griffiths ("New Evidence on New Scotland, 1629" *The William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 49, No. 3, July 1992, pp. 492-508) argue that Alexander, though a Scot, did not resist what was just beginning to be called, at the behest of the king, "Great Britain." Why, then, do you keep his colonial efforts separate from Great Britain? Are you trying to make a parallel between Alexander's ill-fated colonists and the 1619 slaves of Jamestown? If so, why not compare them under the same umbrella?

As I am sure you know, what was tantamount to forced movement of lowland Scots across the Irish Sea was under way by 1619, the year the first slaves were landed in Virginia. The Irish were being pushed out of what would become known as Ulster

Plantation, replaced by those newly arrived Scots-Irish. This action led, ultimately, to the split in Ireland between the Catholic south and the Protestant northeast—and a colonial morass that spilled into the American colonies in the 18th century when some 300,000 Ulster Scots (including ancestors of mine) and their lowland cousins migrated across the ocean, settling in the Appalachian foothills after icy reception by the established coastal colonists. This is a tale of pain and conflict covering centuries, one not yet completely resolved. Why do you ignore it in favor of mention of a few small failed colonies? I really don't know.

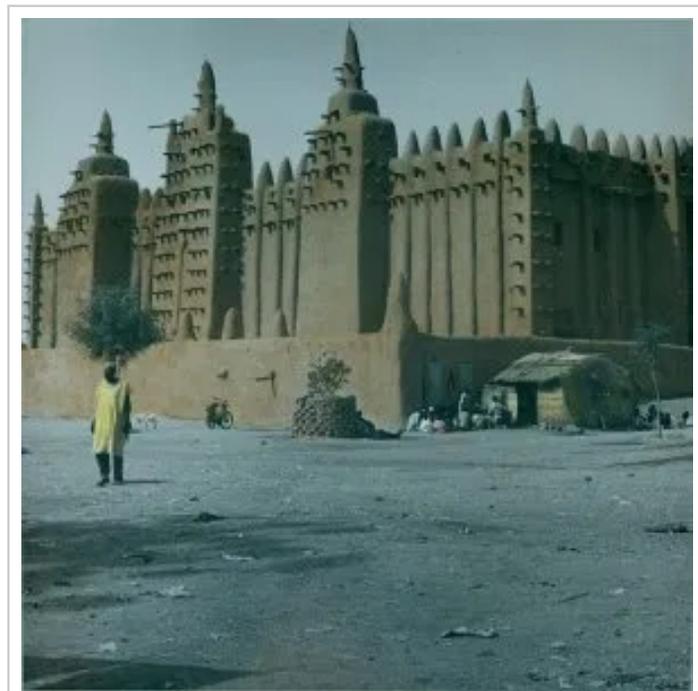
So let's move on, for now.

Because you disparage Africa in your article, I'd like to know of your experience concerning that continent. Do you know that, in 1619, Tombouctou in what is now Mali housed a library already hundreds of years old? The city was a cultural and mercantile center that was beginning a long decline due to a shift in Saharan power centers—but it was still a proud city, one that was the equal of many in Europe even though, of necessity, it was constructed of mud.

Do you know that magnificent buildings can be built of mud? Have you heard of the great mud mosque at Djenné, also in Mali? Its visage is as powerful as that of a European cathedral.

Are you aware that, some 300 miles to the south of Tombouctou, Ouagadougou, the capital of the Mossi kingdom that would become the base for modern Burkina Faso, was thriving as well? Probably, both cities had more going for them at the time than did the borderlands between England and Scotland, the home of the lowland Scots, an area that had been

demolished by war almost every other generation for more than 500 years, leaving the region one of Europe's poorest.



The Mosque at Djenne, Mali. Photo and colorization by Aaron Barlow.

All over Africa, there were thriving economies and cultures that could rival the rest of the world; Africa had yet to be, as Walter Rodney would describe it, 'underdeveloped' by Europe (*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Howard University Press, 1972). Are

you aware of the extent of the degradation of Africa resulting from European conquest?

Maybe you are, but I would like to know. As one who spent four years on the continent, I have listened too often to people with no experience of Africa tell me what life there is like. If you are going to compare black African lives with African-American ones, wouldn't you agree that it would help to have real experience of Africa?

Speaking of which, how much time have you spent in African American communities? You are making judgments on the comparative quality of American-American, and African, life. Can anyone really do that without extensive knowledge of the two? If you have this knowledge, why didn't you include it? Wouldn't it strengthen your argument?

At one point, you claim that "contemporary critics charge European colonialists with all sorts of modern crimes." I hope you won't argue that this is a scholarly statement. If you are going to make such a charge in a scholarly fashion, shouldn't you give names and specifics and discuss, honestly, the strengths and weaknesses of what the others are claiming?

You write that "Within a flourishing capitalist system, the value put on slaves meant that slave owners had every interest in keeping them healthy." Have you looked at the American slave system in detail, particularly in Louisiana, though it was often hideous throughout the slave states? That system urged owners of the massive plantations to use slaves to their greatest immediate potential, one of the hallmarks of capitalism. If slaves dropped dead, more were available and, in terms of the economic return, cheaply. They often did die unnecessarily and horribly—we know so from the historical record.

Have you visited the slave quarters that have been restored over the past generation or two? Have you seen how slaves were forced to live? That their descendants might be doing well in no way mitigates that horror.

Again, though, let's move on. For now, at least.

It seems to me that there is a connection between what you write and the Lost Cause mythology that grew up after the Civil War and that asserted a sort of antebellum utopia. Do you think things would be better now had the Confederacy won the Civil War?

Certainly, as Lewis Raven Wallace writes, "the Lost Cause echoes through our discourse, making a dishonest argument out of something that should have been settled long ago. An honest debate about the legacy of slavery in this country cannot start with the premise that it may or may not have even been bad" (*The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity*, University of Chicago Press,

2019, p. 173). By echoing Lost Cause beliefs, are you not simply appealing to white supremacists and poking at the rest of us to incite argument?

If not, why are you making use of something that has been as thoroughly debunked as Holocaust Denial or the Earl of Oxford's authorship of Shakespeare's plays?

Perhaps the most disturbing (to me) lines in your essay are these:

“ Today, being black in America is one of the best outcomes for a black person globally. If not, more black Americans would own passports and would, over time, have migrated to other places, such as Guyana, Liberia, Haiti, or Sierra Leone. To be black in America is, historically speaking, to have hit the jackpot.

This is a corollary to the 'American exceptionalism' that has long been a foundation of American pride, white supremacy and the Lost Cause itself. To be American, no matter what color, is 'to have hit the jackpot.'

Do you really believe that? Have you never seen the real poverty that still exists in the United States? Have you heard of Brownsville in Brooklyn or Mayersville, Mississippi? Do you know anything, for that matter, about poverty in the opioid-devastated hollers of West Virginia? Can you tell me, from personal experience or credible data, that life in any of these places is better than in Lama-Kara, Togo or Mombasa, Kenya?

Be that as it may, most people love their homelands and would rather live there than elsewhere. If not, attempts to migrate would be much greater than they are.

What can you say to convince me that your article is really something more than a bit of political machination? Why isn't that in your article?

Have you heard of Christian fundamentalist autodidact David Barton who has set up shop as a historian to "prove" that the United States was founded as an explicitly Christian nation—all real evidence to the contrary? Barton wants to convince people he is right; he does not explore the residue of the past for its truths but to impose his own upon it. Can you convince me that you are not doing the same thing?

Finally....

Why, please, did you write that piece for NAS? It is clearly *not* scholarship, though it is dressed in scholarly clothing. Certainly, not all that we academics write is—or needs to be—scholarship—but we should make the distinction clear.

What might your purpose be in writing your article?

Did you really just want a fight?

I don't. Instead, I would like to engage in a broad, open and honest discussion on the topic of race before it tears our country apart. It will be a hard conversation, one where we had to admit our biases and our anger—and where we try to set them aside.

Can you join in?

Or are you satisfied by picking fights?

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