

On the Application of Theories of ‘Internal Colonialism’ to Inuit Societies

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‘Internal colonialism’ was the first political concept I heard articulated after I arrived in the Northwest Territories in 1981. It wasn’t a pointed comment by Georges Erasmus or Mel Watkins, but a taxi driver chuckling during the ride in from the airport in Yellowknife that “the Northwest Territories is Ottawa’s last internal colony”. His ironic line stayed with me over the years as I realized that varying formulations of the concepts ‘internal colony’, ‘internal colonization’ and ‘internal colonialism’ kept coming up in conversation as co-workers and friends discussed the social and political changes taking place in the north, and also as I began to work my way through the social science literature on the ethnic dimension of ‘combined and uneven development’.

This paper is exploratory in nature; it attempts to assess the political character of application of theories of ‘internal colonialism’ to Inuit societies within the much larger global body of literature on ‘internal colonialism’. Comments, critiques and suggestions would be most welcome.

Overview of the Literature

I should begin by noting two significant limitations on my ability to conduct a really thorough literature review – my own linguistic abilities, and the linguistically-restricted contents of the existing databases and search engines. Together, they have resulted in my conducting a literature review of the literature on internal colonialism *that is written in (or translated into) English* (with a few references to sources in French, Spanish, and Portuguese). There may be a flourishing debate on the concepts in question in Tamil and/or Mohawk, but if there are I have no way of knowing about them.

An internal colony is a colony that exists inside the boundaries of the state which colonized it. Internal colonialism dismisses the ‘salt water’ thesis, which holds that colonies can only exist overseas.¹

Early Marxist thinkers were among the first to use the evocative phrase ‘internal colonialism’. In *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, Lenin viewed the Russian empire as an internal market for capital centred in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and Gramsci later discussed the Italian *Mezzogiorno* in similar terms in *The Southern Question*. Both political actors and social scientists began to employ a wide range of definitions of internal colonialism during (by political actors, to mobilize) and after (by social scientists, to explain) the surge of ethno-political

mobilizations which took place around the world in the 1960s and 1970s. While internal colonialism may be a poorly defined term, perhaps no single other phrase “so accurately captures the full nature of the complex interactions involved.”²

The political implications of the concept are obvious:

... by defining inter-regional relationships as ‘colonial’, nationalist leaders have tried to inspire popular support for movements designed to promote greater autonomy, if not outright secession.³

Perhaps the best-known use of the concept by political actors comes from the civil rights struggles in the United States. In a 1964 speech entitled ‘The Black Revolution’, Malcolm X argued that “America is a colonial power. She has colonized 22 million Afro-Americans by depriving us of first-class citizenship, by depriving us of civil rights, actually by depriving us of human rights”.⁴

It was not until the riots of 1967 that Martin Luther King came to characterize America’s black ghettos as internal colonies. In the months before his assassination King began using a vocabulary similar to that of Malcolm X, a vocabulary that would soon also be taken up by Stokely Carmichael, Huey P. Newton, and the Black Panthers. King observed: “The slum is little more than a domestic colony which leaves its inhabitants dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated and humiliated at every turn.”

It is worth remembering that advocating a ‘nationalism of the oppressed’ remains a good way to get oneself killed. In his detention diary, *A Month and a Day*, the Ogoni activist Ken Saro-Wiwa recorded his perception of his people’s potential at the outset of the campaign of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People:

They had been sleepwalking their way towards extinction, not knowing what internal colonialism had done and was doing to them. It had fallen to me to wake them up from the sleep of the century and I had accepted in full the responsibility for doing so. Would they be able to stand up to the rigours of the struggle?⁵

Here in Canada, the concept of internal colonialism has been extensively employed by both Québécois and aboriginal nationalists. Camille Laurin argued in 1979 that:

[The federal government asserts] “sole and sovereign authority... Québec remains an internal colony ... it can’t escape political subordination to the central state, it cannot recognize and inscribe in laws its fundamental reality...”⁶

and René Levesque stated in 1982 that:

The Québécois are nothing more than “an internal colony under the sway of another people”.⁷

The 1975 Dene Declaration stunned the Canadian political system with its bold assertion of both the Dene’s internal colonial status and their nationhood:

We the Dene of the Northwest Territories insist on the right to be regarded by ourselves and the world as a nation. Our struggle is for the recognition of the Dene Nation by the government and peoples of Canada and the peoples and governments of the world.

As once Europe was the exclusive homeland of the European peoples, Africa the exclusive homeland of the African peoples, the New World, North and South America, was the exclusive homeland of Aboriginal peoples of the New World, the Amerindian and the Inuit.

The New World like other parts of the world has suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism. Other peoples have occupied the land – often with force – and foreign governments have imposed themselves on our people. Ancient civilizations and ways of life have been destroyed.

Colonialism and imperialism are now dead or dying. Recent years have witnessed the birth of new nations or rebirth of old nations out of the aches of colonialism. ...

While the Native people of Canada are a minority in their homeland, the Native people of the Northwest Territories, the Dene and the Inuit, are a majority of the population of the Northwest Territories.

The Dene find themselves as part of a country. That country is Canada. But the Government of Canada is not the Government of the Dene. The Government of the Northwest Territories is not the Government of the Dene. These governments were not the choice of the Dene, they were imposed upon the Dene.

What we the Dene are struggling for is the recognition of the Dene nation by the governments and peoples of the world.

And while there are realities we are forced to submit to, such as the existence of a country called Canada, we insist on the right to self-determination as a distinct people and the recognition of the Dene Nation. ...

What we seek then is independence and self-determination within the country of Canada. This is what we mean when we call for a just land settlement for the Dene nation.⁸

The concept of internal colonialism has applied by social scientists in many different formulations with a range of different emphases – and for a number of different purposes – but no agreed-upon methodology. Theories of internal colonialism have been used to explain situations and movements literally around the world – in Argentina⁹, Bangladesh¹⁰, Brazil¹¹, Britain's 'Celtic fringe'¹², Acadia¹³ and Québec¹⁴ in Canada, the Guizhou¹⁵ and Xinjiang¹⁶ regions of China, Colombia¹⁷, Croatia¹⁸, Estonia¹⁹, Finland²⁰, Brittany²¹ in France, the Jharkhand region of India²², Northern Ireland²³, Italy²⁴, the Sanya region of Japan²⁵, Nigeria²⁶, Pakistan²⁷, Palestine²⁸, The Philippines²⁹, South Africa³⁰, the Basque and Catalan regions of Spain³¹, Sri Lanka³², Sudan³³, the Swiss canton of St. Gallen³⁴, Thailand³⁵, the former USSR³⁶, Vietnam³⁷ and Wales³⁸ as well as Appalachia³⁹, Blacks⁴⁰ and Chicanos⁴¹ in the USA. It has been extensively employed to explain the situations and movements of indigenous peoples in Africa⁴², Australia⁴³, South and Central America⁴⁴ and First Nations in Canada⁴⁵ and the USA⁴⁶. Internal colonialism is also used as a basis for comparative analysis of colonial experiences and structures⁴⁷, and is frequently employed by postcolonial literary theorists.⁴⁸ While the number of published works employing internal colonialism has declined (with the exception of its application to indigenous peoples) since the 1970s and 1980s, the concept is still extensively used as a theoretical element of dissertations and theses.

As Robert K. Thomas argued in his seminal 1966 article 'Colonialism: Classic and internal', there are instances when the metaphor of internal colonialism just seems an obvious and compelling way to sum up a situation:

[An Indian reservation is] the most complete colonial system in the world that I know about.⁴⁹

Robert Blauner's 1969 article 'Internal colonialism and ghetto revolt' identified four components which are common to both external and internal processes of colonization:

1. How the racial group enters into the dominant society. ... Colonization begins with a forced involuntary entry.
2. An impact on the culture and social organization of the colonized people which is more than just a result of such 'natural' processes as contact and acculturation. Rather, the colonizing power carries out a policy which constrains, transforms, or destroys indigenous values, orientations, and ways of life.
3. Colonization involves a relationship by which members of the colonized group tend to be administered by being managed and manipulated by outsiders in terms of ethnic status.
4. Racism: a principle of social domination by which a group seen as inferior or different in terms of alleged biological characteristics is exploited, controlled, and oppressed socially and physically by a superordinate group.⁵⁰

Beginning in the 1960s, several broad conceptions of the term internal colonialism emerged – of which two are most important:

1. Internal colonialism as a domestic analogy to forms of economic and social domination in classical colonialism; and,
2. Internal colonialism as intra-national exploitation of distinct cultural groups.

A number of articles have been written which attempt to summarize and synthesize this diverse and unwieldy body of literature. Robert J. Hind concluded that in general, theories of internal colonialism:

offer too many explanations, and make too many deductions in an *ad hoc* or an *ex post facto* manner. ... [They] imply an improbable degree of cohesion and identity amongst specific social groups, and they oversimplify complex social structures and relationships. ... Their nature is such that they tend to assert or assume that which they are endeavouring to demonstrate or prove, a practice which leads in intellectual incoherence and a distortion of historical processes.⁵¹

Many – but by no means all – theories of internal colonialism miss the point that colonialism and imperialism are an integral part of the expansion of capitalism on a world scale. As Rodolfo Stavenhagen has noted,

Capitalist accumulation requires unequal development and social and economic polarization... the system of stratified interethnic relations plays a crucial role. Because more often than not, the pattern of capitalist domination/subordination involves not only economic classes and geographic regions, but also ethnic groups, particularly when in the post-colonial ethnocratic state social class divisions happen to coincide or overlap with ethnic (linguistic, cultural, religious, racial) distinctions. Of course this does not just "happen" accidentally but is the outcome of a particular colonial and post-colonial history. Thus, the pattern of ethnic stratification that we encounter in so many countries today is the expression of a deeper structural relationship that we may call internal colonialism.⁵²

I will comment on just four of the most important applications of theories of internal colonialism: The South African Communist Party's formulation of 'colonialism of a special type', the radical sociology of Robert Blauner, the rather less radical sociology of Michael Hechter, and applications of internal colonialism to the situations of indigenous peoples.

‘Colonialism of a special type’

In the Stalinist two-stage strategy for colonies and semi-colonies, the first stage was to be ‘national liberation’ – the ending of foreign domination. Only afterwards could the second stage – a transition to socialism – be considered. The South African Communist Party (SACP) faced a theoretical challenge in that ‘domination’ of Black South Africans came from a locally-resident White ruling class. Their answer, which emerged beginning in 1953, was to conclude that in their ‘special case’ the colonial relationship was internal to the South African social formation:

On one level, that of ‘White South Africa,’ there are all the features of an advanced capitalist state in its final stage of imperialism...

But at another level, that of ‘Non-White South Africa,’ there are all the features of a colony.

The indigenous population is subjected to extreme national oppression, poverty and exploitation, lack of democratic rights and political domination by a group which does everything to emphasise and perpetuate its alien ‘European’ character...

Non-White South Africa is the colony of White South Africa itself.⁵³

As Alex Callinicos has argued, from a Trotskyist perspective:

In other words: since black South Africa is a nation colonised by the whites, then all its classes should unite to win their political independence. Convenient though these political implications may be, the theory of ‘internal colonialism’ is a piece of bizarre fantasy. South Africa is the most highly industrialised country in Africa, whose population, black and white, has been progressively proletarianised and urbanised over the past century. The SACP invite us to view this capitalist social formation as in fact two societies, one white, the other black, each with its own distinct class structure, related primarily through whites’ colonial domination of blacks. Not only is the suggestion intrinsically preposterous, it flies in the face of the past fifteen years’ research by South African Marxists, which has showed how the institutions of racial domination were first created and have since been reshaped over the years in order to meet the needs of the different fractions of South African capital.⁵⁴

A somewhat more rigorous application of internal colonialism theory in South Africa was developed by Harold Wolpe, who was critical of the SACP’s formulation and used an Althusserian approach which suggested that Blacks and Whites in South Africa had “specific structures” which amounted to them being, in effect, “classes with contradictory interests”. Wolpe concluded:

The uniqueness or specificity of South Africa, in the period of capitalism, lies precisely in this: that it embodies within a single nation-state a relationship characteristic of the external relationship between imperialist states and their colonies (neo-colonies).⁵⁵

Returning to the SACP ‘party line’, it is clear that the SACP needed to find a theoretical way to resolve its emphasis on class struggle with the nationalist African National Congress (ANC)’s emphasis on the national struggle. This application of internal colonialism proved to be “the ideological glue which has held the ANC/SACP alliance together”⁵⁶ through South Africa’s transition from apartheid to neo-liberalism.

The radical sociology of Robert Blauner

Among the first to theorize that African Americans – whose labour had been ruthlessly exploited and who were now consigned to life as a conquered people outside the normative order as it applied to whites – constituted an internal colony within the United States was Robert Blauner, a classic ‘1960s radical’. Blauner sought to challenge what he saw as four fallacies within the established American sociology of the day:

1. The view that racial and ethnic groups are neither central nor persistent elements of modern societies.
2. The idea that race and racial oppression are not independent dynamic forces but are ultimately reducible to other causal determinants, usually economic or psychological.
3. The position that the most important aspects of racism are the attitudes and prejudices of white Americans.
4. The so called ‘immigrant analogy’, the assumption ... that there are no essential long-term differences – in relation to the larger society – between the ‘Third World’ or racial minorities and the European ethnic groups.⁵⁷

Rejecting the perspective that African Americans are ‘just another minority’, Blauner argued that the models of ‘race relations’ then in common usage in the United States failed to acknowledge and address the racial division of labour and the very different systems of prejudice and control that he saw around him. As struggles against racism in the US began to parallel the anti-colonial struggles already underway in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, Blauner “adopted the language and the model of ‘colonialism’ that had been adopted by ‘the movement’” and developed an analysis of how African Americans had come to constitute an internal colony within the US.

The importance of Blauner’s formulation should not be underestimated. As Stephen Steinberg has commented:

Here was a mind-boggling alternative to the race relations model that dominated sociological thinking on race relations for several decades. No longer were blacks “white Americans in black skin.” No longer were they merely the objects of the prejudice and discrimination that all minorities encounter. No longer was the ghetto “a temporary waystation”, like the neighbourhoods once occupied by immigrants before they moved to the suburbs. The colonial model swept away all of these premises, and portrayed blacks as a minority of a different kind: a permanent minority, an oppressed people, a ‘colonized group’.

The conception called the entire liberal project into question. By refuting the immigrant analogy, it implied that the traditional remedies – the processes and mechanisms that had worked for immigrants – could not be counted on to deliver blacks from the social and economic margins. ... The colonial analogy also challenged another key liberal assumption – that economic mobility on the part of individual blacks would necessarily result in racial integration. No longer was it certain that blacks could be – or *wanted* to be – integrated into white communities.⁵⁸

Michael Hechter and the ‘Celtic Fringe’

The basic argument of Michael Hechter’s influential 1975 book *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development*⁵⁹ was that Britain’s ‘Celtic fringe’ (Ireland, Scotland and Wales) had been denied full industrial development as a result of a ‘cultural division of labour’ within the United Kingdom. The relations of production within an internal colony are structured, Hechter argued, in terms of a cultural division of labour wherein “a system of stratification where objective cultural distinctions are super-imposed upon class lines”. This cultural division of labour permits the marginal indigenous population to retain some of the features of its traditional culture. Identity maintenance and ethnopolitical activism result from a conjunction of economic (class) and sociocultural (ethnic) relations.

At least as applied to ‘the Celtic fringe’, Hechter’s arguments have been intensively and comprehensively criticised. Taking just one of many examples, John Lovering argued with regard to Wales that:

... the conceptions of ‘economic exploitation’ and the state employed in [Hechter’s] model derive from an eclectic, ahistorical approach with no firm material basis. The empirical predictions are not borne out by an inspection of reality, and they actually obscure important aspects of the present conjuncture. An alternative approach, developed from an analysis of the dominant tendencies of capitalist production in different historical phases, makes it possible to understand the transformation in the articulation of the Welsh economy that is occurring in the present period. This approach also reveals that the state is at present a major factor inhibiting the internal disintegration of the Welsh economy. The theory of ‘internal colonialism’ fails to reveal this or to provide a basis for understanding historical and contemporary Welsh development. In particular, it obscures class relationships. Welsh development can best be understood as a particular instance of capitalist uneven development.⁶⁰

William N. Sloan argued that Hechter fundamentally missed the point of the experience of Britain’s ‘Celtic fringe’, since:

... the underlying and underemphasized thesis which actually does seem to be demonstrated by his analysis is precisely that it is imperialism which creates ethnic nationalism, and not the suppression of ethnic national feeling which identifies imperialism. ... Rather than the theory of ethnicity enlightening a definition of imperialism, should not the reader demand that just the opposite be the case?⁶¹

Hechter’s approach over-emphasized ethnic factors to the exclusion of considerations of class. His theory does not even *refer* to capitalism as such. It quickly became, however, a trendy sociological ‘model’ which:

... spawned a variety of look-alike studies which have sought to ‘explain’ ethno-regional disparities throughout the peripheral, semi-peripheral and core regions of the world. As such, however, the theory has explained very little and has been used more in a descriptive manner to characterise situations of internal colonialism. In this context the concept has been used in two main ways. The first is in analyses of dependence and exploitation in the broadest sense, the general characteristics of which are simply listed and ascribed the epithet ‘internal colonialism’ ... The second is in an emotive context, sometimes in unlikely and imprecise situations, simply for its heuristic value.⁶²

Applications of internal colonialism to the situations of indigenous peoples

Among the first applications of theories of internal colonialism to the situations of indigenous peoples were two 1965 articles by Pablo Gonzalez-Casanova⁶³ and Rodolfo Stavenhagen⁶⁴ in the journal *Studies in Comparative International Development* which rejected dualist theories of development as they were applied to indigenous peoples. A considerable literature has since applied various conceptions of internal colonialism to the situations of a wide range of indigenous peoples, employing many different variations on the basic theme – many of which seek to provide alternatives to mainstream analyses of indigenous/non-indigenous relations.

Vic Satzewich and Terry Wotherspoon have summarized the strengths and the weaknesses of the internal colonial model as it has been applied to aboriginal peoples in Canada. They conclude that it “tends to assume that aboriginal and white are homogeneous groups”, and thus reifies the two categories and ignores class interests. It assumes that:

... all whites have similar interests in relation to the maintenance of an internal colonial relationship with aboriginal peoples, and that all aboriginal peoples have a singular set of economic, social and political interests that revolve around resistance to internal colonial domination.⁶⁵

In the same manner that we must challenge those who argue that all men benefit from the oppression of women or that all whites benefit from the oppression of blacks, Satzewich and Wotherspoon argue that we must challenge those who would argue that all non-aboriginals benefit from the oppression of aboriginals:

... the internal colonial model is silent on the form of social and economic organization which characterizes white society, and whether this social and economic organization has had a formative impact on aboriginal peoples' lives. Within the model, there is no mention of the fact that it was a European society characterized by the presence of a particular mode of production, and that within this mode of production there are certain social classes and genders that have differential relationships and access to the means of production. Differences in economic power have a determinate impact on the political power that they possess.⁶⁶

Two notable articles reflecting on the application of models of internal colonialism to Aboriginal Australians are worthy of special mention. The first – which is quite well known, at least in Australia – is Mervyn Hartwig's 1978 chapter “Capitalism and Aborigines: The theory of internal colonialism and its rivals”, in which he applies aspects of the logic of Wolpe's critique of SACP's formulation to formulations of internal colonialism in Australia. Hartwig expressed discomfort with the concept of “colonial exploitation”, and asked “How does such ‘exploitation’ differ from class exploitation in capitalist societies?”⁶⁷ He went on to develop a theory of internal colonialism which explains how “the specific terms in which ideological and political domination over Aborigines” relates to “specific modes of exploitation of Aboriginal societies”, as “the best framework for an analysis of the intersection of class with race and ethnicity.” This approach, he argued, “... offers a satisfactory explanation of the profound duality – class/nation, integration/separation – what has characterised Aboriginal aspirations” and “... locates the history of Aboriginal-White relations adequately in the comparative history of race and ethnic relations.”⁶⁸

In the second, and less well-known, article, David Drakakis-Smith built on the insights of Wolpe and Hartwig to develop an analysis premised on the argument that “internal colonialism must be related to the conservation of [a] non-capitalist mode of production, for the specific purpose of deriving some advantage from its existence.”⁶⁹

Drakakis-Smith’s approach was to study “within a single state, ... the process of conservation as applied to the articulation of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production” placing emphasis on “the superstructural mechanisms of an exploitive process – the political, cultural and ethnic ideology – the benefits of which are distributed primarily within the confines of the domestic class structure” of Australia.⁷⁰

Summary

In their cogent analysis of Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka, Kristian Stokke and Anne Kirsti Ryntveit argue that:

... arguments about internal colonialism represent a strategic essentialism deployed by Tamil nationalists rather than an accurate representation of economic, social and political relations in Sri Lanka. ... nationalist mobilization cannot be reduced to essentialist notions of primordial nations, territorial nation-states, or internal colonialism. On the contrary, nationalist mobilization should be understood as the outcome of cultural and political practices by a multitude of actors, operating in time- and place-specific contexts. As demonstrated by the social construction of ‘Tamilness’ and the changing character of Tamil nationalist politics, questions regarding the characteristics of nations, the relationship between state and nation and the causes of nationalism can only be resolved through contextual analyses.⁷¹

As Harold Wolpe noted in the case of the South African Communist Party’s model of ‘colonialism of a special type’, many models of internal colonialism conceive of domination and exploitation “as occurring between ‘racial’, ‘ethnic’ and ‘national’ categories” rather than between social classes. When we reach the logical absurdity of journal articles referring to the ability of “The rulers of the South ... to colonise their own countries”⁷² we must ask if there is anything happening here that could not be explained in conventional class terms.

Applications of theories of internal colonialism to Inuit societies

In his books *The People’s Land: Eskimos and Whites in the Eastern Arctic*⁷³ and *The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers and the Shapers of the World*⁷⁴ anthropologist Hugh Brody provides profound insights into how intensely *colonial* the Inuit experience of incorporation into Western society has been:

Inuktitut has several words for fear. Each is a root, to which the infix *-suk-* is added to show a feeling or *-na-* to show a circumstance. Many words for danger are based on the root *kappia*. Hence fear of danger, *kappiasuk-*, and something being frightened, *kappiana-*. Another, less common word for fear is based on the root *irksi*, which denotes a source of terror. Polar bears are sometimes said to be *irksina* – terrifying.

During one of our lessons, Anaviapik talked about white people who came from the south and bossed Inuit around. He gave the example of a policeman who was especially domineering, who gave orders that resulted in men working intolerable hours, and who had sexual liaisons with women who did not like him. This example led to our talking about why Inuit had, at times, done things that were not in their own interest. “*Ilirasulaurpugut*,” Anaviapik said. “We felt *ilira*.” I

did not know the word. He began to explain it to me. “*Iliranalaurtut.*” “They were *ilira* causing.” So *ilira* is to do with being afraid? I asked. Like *kappia*? No, not that kind of fear. And not the *irksi* kind of fear either. Anaviapik gave examples of what might make you feel *ilira*: ghosts, domineering and unkind fathers, people who are strong but unreasonable, whites from the south. What is it that these have in common? They are people or things that have power over you and can be neither controlled nor predicted. People or things that make you feel vulnerable, and to which you are vulnerable.

Anaviapik explained further: when southerners told Inuit to do things that were against Inuit tradition, or related to the things that Qallunaat wanted from the North, the Inuit felt that they had to say yes. They felt too much *ilira* to say no. There was a danger – not of a kind that was easy to describe, but real enough. A possibility of danger. White people had things that Inuit needed: guns, ammunition, tobacco, tea, flour, cloth. They were also quick to lose their tempers, and seemed to have feelings that went out of control for no evident reason. They had power, and there was no equality. These circumstances inspired *ilira*. I asked if this still held true, in the Arctic of the 1970s. Yes, Anaviapik said, for the most part; there was some *ilira* – not with every southerner, but with most. They had the power, and they were not like Inuit.

The word *ilira* goes to the heart of colonial relationships, and it helps to explain the many times that Inuit, and so many other peoples, say yes when they want to say no, or say yes and then reveal, later, that they never meant it at all. *Ilira* is a word that speaks to the subtle but pervasive results of inequality. Through the inequality it reveals, the word shapes the whole tenor of interpersonal behaviour, creating many misunderstandings, mistrust and bad faith. It is the fear that colonialism instils and evokes, which then distorts meanings, social life and politics. The power of colonial masters is indeed like that of ghosts – appearing from nowhere, seemingly supernatural and non-negotiable.

Robert Paine of Memorial University offered similar insights into what he termed ‘welfare colonialism’ in his article “The nursery game: Colonizers and colonized in the Canadian Arctic” in the inaugural issue of the journal *Études/Inuit/Studies* in 1977.

The Inuit political response to this situation took the form of a rather more moderate form of indigenous nationalism than that adopted by their Dene neighbours to the west and south. The first generation of political leaders referred to Inuit as a ‘people’ rather than demanding recognition as a ‘nation’, and sought arrangements that would result in the greatest degree of autonomy possible within the federal system rather than asserting the right to “independence and self-determination”.

This approach is reflected in a speech entitled ‘Canada’s Forgotten Colony’, given by James Arvaluk – the second President of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada – to the Rotary Club of Ottawa on January 5, 1976. The speech was made just months after the release of the Dene Declaration, and it employs a similar internal colonial analogy, but the tone could scarcely be more different – as if Arvaluk was deliberately distancing Inuit nationalism from Dene and Québécois nationalism:

We are not extremists. We are not separatists. We have no history of hostility and confrontation... but one of co-operation. And we are optimistic that the Government of Canada and the people of Canada will accept our proposed [Nunavut] land sharing settlement in a spirit of co-operation. We are willing to share our land and its resources. It’s just that we want benefits... and to ensure that the land is preserved as we know it for future generations of Inuit.

The political legacy of this use of ‘internal colonial’ discourse and ‘Fourth World-ist’ political strategies by Inuit in Canada (and elsewhere in the Arctic) is similar to the legacy of the use of ‘anti-colonial’ discourse and ‘Third World-ist’ political strategies in Africa in the 1960s and 70s – the transfer of a certain degree of decision-making power from ‘colonial’ elites to an emerging layer of local elites, within a constrained constitutional framework that poses no serious threat to (and arguably advances the interests of) the capitalist state or the capitalist system.

The social and economic legacy of this political strategy has been characterized as a form of continued internal colonialism by no less than one of the regional organizations which was created as a result of the strategy – the Makivik Corporation, which under the terms of the 1975 James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement represents the economic, political and social interests of the Inuit of Nunavik (northern Québec). In 1984 they released a report entitled *Colonized in our Homeland – Colonizés Chez Nous: Employment and Income Patterns in Northern Québec* to decry economic and social conditions in the region.

The most articulate critic of the prevailing economic and social conditions in Nunavut is Jim Bell, editor of the weekly newspaper *Nunatsiaq News*⁷⁵, who has called the new territory “Canada’s newest colony”⁷⁶:

... the federal government has displayed a consistent attitude toward Nunavut, an attitude that in the absence of a coherent approach to northern development, amounts to a de facto policy made up of two key elements: calculated neglect, and thinly disguised neo-colonialism. ...

... whenever Nunavut shows any sign of lessening its dependence on Ottawa, at one day standing on its own feet, a federal politician jumps up to break our knee caps with a baseball bat. Welcome to Canada’s newest colony.

I am aware of no academic work which does justice to the history of the combined and uneven development of capitalism in the Arctic and the incorporation of Inuit regions into a number of different political systems – it remains to be written.⁷⁷

The best known Canadian academic work applying a theory of internal colonialism to Inuit is that of Jean-Philippe Chartrand and J. Iain Prattis. Chartrand’s unpublished 1986 M.A. thesis “Internal colonialism and Inuit ethnic identity maintenance: The relevance of Inuktitut language retention for the ethnic survival and the adaptation of Inuit to development and modernisation in the Canadian north”⁷⁸ was followed by a joint 1990 journal article with Prattis as the lead author.⁷⁹

To their credit, Chartrand and Prattis follow Hechter’s methodology more closely than most and attempt to prove that a ‘cultural division of labour’ exists in the Eastern Arctic. Unfortunately, they simplified Hechter’s test for the existence of such a division of labour almost to the point of caricature:

For our purposes, we will consider that a cultural division of labour exists if there is a substantial difference between the respective magnitudes of Inuit and non-native labour force activity [and] we will consider that a cultural division of labour exists if an ethnic group is overrepresented substantially in specific types of occupations.⁸⁰

Having used 1981 Census data to document the bifurcated labour forces characteristics that existed in the Eastern Arctic, they concluded that a cultural division of labour existed and that the Eastern Arctic constituted an internal colony of southern Canada.

It is not clear to me what this exercise contributes to our understanding of that place and time. While I would agree that a ‘cultural division of labour’ as Hechter defined it existed between Anglophones and Francophones in Québec during the first half of the 20th century, I would argue that the “substantial difference between the respective magnitudes of Inuit and non-native labour force activity” in Nunavut is better described in terms of an uneven and incomplete – and dynamic – process of the incorporation of an indigenous people into the capitalist world economy.

A far less formulaic approach was taken by John D. O’Neil in his unpublished 1984 Ph.D. dissertation "Is it cool to be an Eskimo?: A study of stress, identity, coping, and health among Canadian Inuit young adult men" and his 1986 journal article “The politics of health in the Fourth World: A northern Canadian example”. O’Neill references the *general* ‘internal colonial’ position of Inuit as a ‘Fourth World’ people:

Structured as internal colonies in relation to the larger nation-state, Fourth World situations exist with First (e.g., American Indians and Australian Aboriginals), Second (e.g., indigenous peoples in northern USSR) and Third World contexts (e.g. Indians in Central America). These situations are better characterized as Fourth World, rather than as ethnic minorities, because the populations involved are the original inhabitants of the area, whose lands have been expropriated and who have become subordinate politically and economically to an immigrant population.⁸¹

before proceeding to analyze the impacts of that position on Inuit health – especially Inuit mental health:

... coping tactics, strategies and styles generated among young Inuit are legitimate, rather than deviant responses to the social, economic, and political conditions of internal colonialism which characterises northern Canadian society. In a variety of ways, Inuit youth are contributing to the redefinition and ultimate restructuring of northern society in a manner which strengthens Inuit identity and tradition, and redistribution economic and political resources in a more equitable arrangement. Participation in this process is problematic: the experience of stress and its health consequences are often the consequence.⁸²

Transcultural psychiatrist Laurence Kirmayer and his collaborators have developed an analysis of the impact of the psychological, social and economic effects of “the history of colonialism and government interventions (including the residential school system, out-adoption, and centralised bureaucratic control) [on] the mental health of Canadian aboriginal peoples”⁸³ which concludes that:

Cultural discontinuity and oppression have been linked to high rates of depression, alcoholism, suicide, and violence in many communities, with the greatest impact on youth.⁸⁴

The cumulative effects of internal colonialism on cultural identity and continuing tensions between the values of aboriginal peoples and mainstream society complicate the efforts of aboriginal youth to forge their identities and find their ways in the world.⁸⁵

Kirmayer’s work has been roughly paralleled (in a political rather than in a psychiatric sense) in the United States by the work of Lisa M. Poupart, who argues that domestic violence within American Indian communities is an expression of internalized oppression and an extension of Euro-American violence towards American Indian nations.⁸⁶ These insights are critical to the development of effective strategies to address the social pathologies which plague the aboriginal peoples of the Arctic, including some of the highest youth suicide rates in the world.⁸⁷

One of the most interesting applications of internal colonialism theory to Inuit societies has been that of a pioneering Inuit academic – Robert Petersen, Greenland’s ‘organic intellectual’, and the now-retired Rector of *Ilisimatusarfik* (The University of Greenland). In a paper presented to the first International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences (ICASS) in Québec City in 1992, and later published in somewhat modified form in *Arctic Anthropology*⁸⁸, Petersen reviewed the history of Danish colonialism in Greenland and went on to discuss the “problems [that] arise when the ideology of the colonizers is adopted by the colonized peoples themselves, especially by the educated individuals who are more likely to be employed in positions of influence”⁸⁹ (i.e. the managerial elite created by self-government arrangements).

Petersen contrasted the ‘living conditions’ of – and the power relations between – Greenlanders living in the large towns on the west coast with those living in the smaller settlements and on the east coast, and concluded that:

... [while] people from the Greenland settlements do not yet use the term “internal colonialism,” ... when they say that they hardly distinguish between the administration from Copenhagen and that from Nuuk – even though they say it under incitement – the term “internal colonialism” is in fact indicated, despite all the problems with defining it.⁹⁰

Robert Petersen’s brave and thoughtful article is the first – but hopefully not the last – by an Inuk social scientist using the insights of ‘internal colonialism’ to critique policies of one of the regional self-government arrangements which have been established across much of the Arctic over the past 25 years.

Conclusion

The Arctic is home to societies that have been profoundly impacted by varying processes of colonization by – and incorporation into – ‘southern’ capitalist states. The history of Inuit societies in the 20th century was one of processes of ‘combined and uneven development’ as transformative as those of any on the planet, and the 21st century will see both a continuation of the evolution of relationships between Inuit regions and the states they find themselves in and – largely as the result of the implementation of self-government arrangements – significant changes in the relationships between groups and regions *within* Inuit societies.

‘Arctic social science’ is, however, currently rather undertheorized – both in terms of political and social theories being brought to bear on Arctic societies and in terms of lessons being learned from the experiences of Arctic societies and contributed to national and international circuits of theoretical debate. It appears to lack the tools required to do justice to the empirical richness of the region.

The vast literature developing and applying differing theories of internal colonialism elsewhere in the world has much to contribute to remedying this theoretical anaemia in Arctic social science, but care must be taken to research and learn the lessons of the rich theoretical debate over internal colonialism that has taken place in other parts of the world. Simply invoking the concept ‘internal colonialism’ is no substitute for careful analysis of the specific modes of exploitation occurring at any given time and place, and for equally careful theorization of the intersections of class with ethnicity which occur as a result of the combined and uneven development of capitalism – in the Arctic as in the rest of the world.

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