

Why is the charge of "internal colonialism" made?
Who benefits from making it?

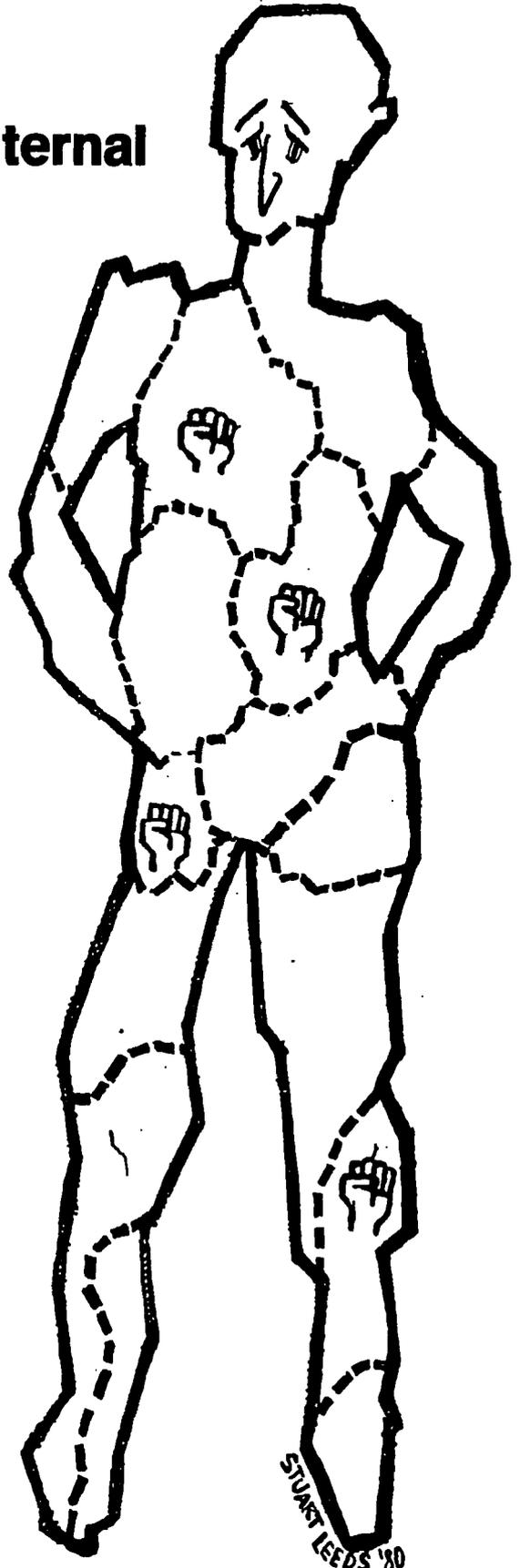
Being Skeptical About "Internal Colonialism"

BY DANIEL J. O'NEIL

Internal colonialism has become a popular term in academic parlance. Although suggested in the writings of Lenin, it was probably first developed by the Mexican intellectual Pablo Gonzales Casanova, who employed the term in his *Democracy in Mexico* to describe the relationship between the Mexican Government and the Indian population. In the United States it has since been used to characterize the status of virtually every minority. The charge is made that blacks, Mexican-Americans, Indians, and even women have been colonized. Virtually all culturally pluralistic societies—outside the socialist bloc—are now stigmatized as instances of internal colonialism.

There are four major objections to the concept of internal colonialism. First, the term colonialism is today so pejorative that it—like racism, fascism, sexism, and McCarthyism—probably ought to be avoided by social scientists and others committed to scientific objectivity. It conjures up images of natives reduced to childlike status, deprived of their culture and economic resources. Nobody today wants to be a colonial or to be colonized. References to colonialism may score points or terminate conversations, but they do not clarify or communicate information. The promoters of internal colonial imagery might be censured on the same grounds that Plato condemned the sophists who similarly corrupted the language.

Second, the purveyors of the terminology seldom recognize the advances associated with historical colonialism. It may be unpopular to say so, but the obvious fact is that colonialism was not devoid of benefits. It linked the non-West to "world culture"—modern science, technology, and economic development. It introduced some knowledge of parliamentary democracy. It offered new and unexpected alternatives. It provided the ideology that anticolonials would employ against their status. A comparison of the pre- and postcolonial worlds might suggest that the rule of law, bureaucratic efficiency, and relative opportunity to dissent under some colonial systems have not improved since independence. Many of the new states have been marked by the



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rejection of basic freedoms, economic chaos, and massacre of ethnic minorities. Writing about India, one of the more successful transitions, Walter Crocker noted in *Nehru: A Contemporary Estimate* (1966):

[T]here can be little doubt that by 1963 the people of India as a whole were not better fed or clad, or housed, and were worse, and more corruptly, governed, and subject to a worse situation of law and order, with higher taxes, ever rising prices, ever acute foreign exchange difficulties, and more unemployment, than in 1946, the year [Nehru] became Head of Government.

Third, talk about domestic colonialism obscures the different types of colonial experience. There were both the most oppressive varieties as well as more benevolent colonialisms. There were regimes perceived as temporary and others perceived as permanent. There was direct and indirect rule as well as assimilationist and separatist arrangements. The British, Spanish, French, Dutch, Americans, and Russians have hardly exercised the same kinds of external domination. Compare, for example, British rule in India, French rule in Algeria, Dutch rule in Indonesia, American rule in the Philippines, and Russian rule in East Europe. Then, too, colonial situations of the nineteenth century differed drastically from those of the twentieth.

To imply, as some do, that the status of American minorities is like that of the most oppressed of the nineteenth-century colonized peoples is absurd. American and Western European ethnic minorities have the opportunity to vote, to elect peers, and to protest legally.

Fourth, the proponents of internal colonial symbolism seldom acknowledge the universality of colonialism. They obscure the fact that virtually all peoples were themselves once colonized. Britain was colonized for four hundred years by the Romans and later by the Normans. Russia was colonized by the Tartars. What is now the United States was colonized by the English, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Russians. Latin America lingered three hundred years under Spanish rule. One might describe Vichy France as a German colony, and postwar Germany and Japan as American colonies. Using the term loosely, one can demonstrate that virtually all peoples at one time or another have been colonized. Thus, no one has a unique claim to consideration based upon a historical colonial experience.

Given the slipperiness of internal colonial imagery, why is it used? Who stands to profit by it? It seems to serve the interests of two sectors. It is a technique to support the claim of some domestic group for special treatment. The group can claim it was unfairly exploited, has been disadvantaged by the system, and is due concessions or reparations. As the victim of internal colonialism, it is linked to the Third World and thus due special consideration. Second, the imagery stigmatizes the system, and there are those who have an economic, political, or ideological interest in doing that. They often make no secret of their desire to undermine the society's legitimacy and eventually to destabilize it. The real question is not why some sectors utilize inter-

nal colonial imagery but why others go along with it.

Today, there are lamentably few success stories among pluralistic cultures. An increasing number of social scientists, often in guarded terms, have expressed reservations about the possibility of reconciling cultural pluralism with viable democracy. As early as 1926, the historian Carlton Hayes wrote in *Essays on Nationalism*:

It is difficult to perceive how political democracy, upon which we have set our hearts, can be conducted more advantageously in a country of many and varied nationalities.

The political scientists Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth Shepsle concluded their *Politics in Plural Societies* (1972) with the statement:

We ask, is the resolution of intense but conflicting preferences in the plural society manageable in a democratic framework? We think not.

A sociologist, Michael Hechter, writes in *Internal Colonialism* (1976):

To the extent that a society is composed of different ethnic groups, it will tend to be plagued by conflicts which may ultimately threaten its territorial, as well as its moral, integrity.

Using the emotive language of internal colonialism simply puts additional strain on one of the few plural societies that seems somewhat viable. It questions the legitimacy of one of the few societies that reconciles cultural pluralism with democratic and economic vitality. It belittles the magnanimity of the majority and the accomplishments of the minority. It implies that cultural pluralism is not possible in that all mixed societies are basically exploitative. In effect, it is a plea for cultural homogeneity. **▼▼▼**