My Dialogue with Rod Bush on Internal Colonialism

I. Introduction

Rod Bush mentored and inspired me regarding the subject of Internal Colonialism (IC), and so I am grateful to present this reflection on his views about the topic of 21st century Internal Colonialism Theory (ICT). He was a scholar who “talked the talk while he walked the walk,” critiquing while praising, encouraging social action while reflecting, and publishing while mentoring.

The concept of Internal Colonialism—the idea that colonies exist today within advanced industrial societies such as the U.S.—has long been a popular framework (among African Americans and other oppressed populations) from which to view group oppression. While external colonialism is a universally accepted phenomenon, Internal Colonial Theory (ICT) has received a great deal of push-back from scholars determined to declare the U.S. as post-colonial without addressing what happened to the colonized when the colonizers
declared independence. ICT is a specific area within the field of Racial & Ethnic Relations that can intersect that field with Social Inequality/Social Stratification [i.e. the analysis of class]. Frequently, sociologists explore either race or class as separate phenomena. However, when advanced applications of ICT assess barrios, ghettos, and reservations as Internal Colonies (IC), they reveal race and class as intimately connected (Allen 1969, Barrera 1979, Allen 2005, Pinderhughes 2009). Historically, the working class and underclass of Internal Colonies in the U.S. been managed by a class of petty bourgeois managers, initially White, but increasingly since the 1970s, Black and Latinx. Theorists of ICT argue that the durability of American racism is rooted in the systemic structural character of the Internal Colonies of Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinx.

My interactions with Rod began in an informal caucus of progressive Black sociologists within the Association of Black Sociologists (ABS). Our frequent progressive topic-focused sessions led to a 2006 panel on IC at ABS in Montreal. A number of scholars in the audience, as well as the presenters, expressed a strong interest in engaging in a further re-exploration of IC. Thus was born an email discussion list of a number of interested sociologists who visualized an anthology on the subject. Still, at that time we were all trying to strategize how to reassert what I would now describe as “Classic Internal Colonialism Theory.” A major tenet of this position included the assertion of African America as a single colony, regardless of the modern population dispersal pattern of Blacks in the United States. Of course, other issues appeared up for debate, such as whether or not to use a class analysis; whether superexploitation is an essential characteristic of IC; how to describe the history of African Americans under IC; and whether the application of ICT conflicts or is in harmony with analyzing other forms of social oppression.

Some of the historical origins of the Internal Colonial concept have been documented previously (Pinderhughes 2011). Many African American activists used a variation of the framework of “nation within a nation” as far back as 1830. Vladimir Lenin first made observations that have been equated to Internal Colonial Analysis in 1899 in his
work *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Hechter 1975:8). More recently, in the last half of the 1960s and early 1970s, led by Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, Latin American sociologists used the term in a number of articles analyzing conditions in specific Latin American countries: Brazil, Chile, Columbia, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru (Gonzalez Casanova 1965, Cotler 1970, Frank 1970, Havens & Flinn 1970, and Stavenhagen 1970). Other academic disciplines, including anthropology, economics, political science, and history, have also explored the Internal Colonial paradigm.

The high point of the popular use of the Internal Colonial framework was during the surge of the Black Power movement in the U.S. in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In fact, while the major Black Power organizations had very different programs and proposed solutions, all considered themselves heirs of Malcolm X and concluded that Black people in the U.S. were Internally Colonized (Woodard 1999:71). Malcolm X’s most famous formulation on the subject stated:

You can’t understand what is going on in Mississippi if you don’t understand what is going on in the Congo. And you can’t really be interested in what’s going on in Mississippi if you’re not also interested in what’s going on in the Congo. They’re both the same. The same interests are at stake. The same sides are drawn up, the same schemes are at work in the Congo that are at work in Mississippi. The same stake—no difference whatsoever. (Malcolm X 1965:126)

With this unity of analytical thought led by Malcolm X on the question of the Internal Colonization of Black People in the United States, the existence of the Black Internal Colony/Colonies became beyond dispute for most oppressed African Americans. Thus Classic ICT has a long and storied history with ancestral roots in multiple fields going back decades and even longer.

On the ICT discussion list created in 2006, we debated possible anthology formats over the next couple of years. Even though our collective vision of the anthology was quite expansive, unfortunately, as I was the primary facilitator, this working group did not survive when I went into a prolonged hibernation period to focus exclusively
on writing my long delayed dissertation that was initially focused on another subject.

Still, with Rod’s and other colleagues’ encouragement, I developed and expanded my presentation notes from that 2006 panel to produce an area paper, “The Continuing Relevance of ICT to African America.” After Rod read a draft of this paper, I experienced an unexpected outcome.

II. Lessons from Rod Bush

A. Support the Principled Engagement of Ideas

To say that Rod Bush became a very important supporter of my work is a huge understatement. In 2008, he published a chapter titled “The Internal Colony Hybrid: Reformulating Structure, Culture and Agency,” in the collection Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations edited by Smith and Leavy (Bush 2008).

He devoted six pages to discussing his agreements, doubts and arguments in relation to my unpublished area paper. He also very actively encouraged me to condense my paper for possible publication. While questioning some minor aspects and even a major element of my area paper, in “The Internal Colony Hybrid,” Rod argued that it was the best work on ICT since a Ron Bailey article in 1973 on “Economic Aspects of the Black Internal Colony.”

As a graduate student, hearing this opinion about my newly evolving work was mind-blowing. By engaging with me in a principled exchange of ideas, Rod modeled the epitome of academic mentorship for a topic to which I have felt connected since my time in the Black Panther Party. He was so generous with his commentary that he inspired me at a time when I was faltering in my doctoral work.

B. Be Generous with Your Commentary

My doctoral work was at a critical point when he shared a draft of that chapter with me: I was having trouble with my original dissertation topic assessing Black student protest in the 1990s. With his ongoing
support, I successfully petitioned to change my dissertation topic to a theoretical one. Once I switched topics, I wrote my dissertation focused on a complete re-assessment of ICT (21st Century Chains: the Continuing Relevance of Internal Colonialism Theory) which resulted in my “geo-focused” approach to the subject. Of those assembled in Montreal, I believe only Rod Bush and I eventually published on the subject of ICT. In addition to writing “The Internal Colony Hybrid,” Rod also expounded on the “Third World Within” (the United States and other imperialist countries), in his “Black Internationalism and Transnational Africa” (Bush 2011).

By supporting me in the generous way that he did, Rod’s principled engagement of ideas left a mark on me that I was able to extend to my own writing.

C. Engage in Dialogue to Cultivate Understanding Rather to Make Points or to Be Right

In addition to offering me ongoing encouragement to publish my re-assessment of ICT, Rod shared my writings on IC with his graduate students. He urged me to present regularly on various aspects of the subject of IC, including annual presentations at the Left Forum, 2010-2013. Rod claimed that my dissertation work was the most advanced analysis of ICT that he had ever read—and all this while he maintained his own critique of my framework for re-assessing ICT.

Even as he held to his preference for the single diasporic colony approach, he kept pushing me to further elaborate my geo-focused framework. His comradely actions toward our differences were unlike the ideological struggle approach to theoretical disagreements that I’d experienced in my past activist work.

As I muse about Rod now, I think that his desire to push others to improve their work seemed to override the importance of his stand on particular issues.
III. Distinguishing Classic Internal Colonial Theory from that of the 21st Century

Although many community activists continued to agree with the Internal Colonial Analysis of African America, the concept fell out of favor in mainstream sociology. In 1969, with the publication of his “Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt,” White sociologist Robert Blauner was immediately anointed as the pre-eminent elaborator of “the Internal Colonial analogy” even though Blauner himself later (1972) pointed to the more advanced assessment of African American Robert L. Allen, who also published in 1969. Moreover, by the mid-1970s, Blauner stopped using Internal Colonial Analysis (2001). This allowed a free-fire zone for unanswered criticism of ICT. The concept became derided and at times dismissed by mainstream sociologists (Bonilla-Silva 2001:29-30; Omi & Winant 1994:45-46).

Utilizing Rod Bush’s example in mentoring me, I was able to evaluate and answer these critiques in my dissertation in a nuanced way (Pinderhughes 2009:104-118). In the spirit of how Rod dealt with his differences with me, I approached the subject elaborating on my assessment of the flaws in their arguments by carefully critiquing the heart of their criticisms of ICT. I exposed the weaknesses in their assessments without attacking their main—and far more substantial—analyses concerning racism, after which I discussed how my re-analysis of ICT could actually be seen to be in relative harmony with their frameworks on conceptualizing racial oppression (Pinderhughes 2009:120-126).

Of course, I describe my own work as 21st century ICT. But Rod also wrote about ICT in this new century—and his ideas clearly differ from mine in two aspects: the minor aspect is regarding the application of coloniality, and the major regarding his continued use of the single Internal Colony framework that sharply contrasts with my assessment that each contiguous land area occupied by the colonized is a separate colony.

Another writer who has produced a 21st century take on IC is Robert L. Allen, whose “Reassessing the Internal (Neo) Colonialism
Theory” in 2005 offered the first widely circulated 21st century re-visiting of ICT. Rod’s analysis is similar to and in harmony with Allen’s perspective. Allen also speaks in the singular concerning the concept of a “Black colony” in the U.S. (2005). Both of them also apply the world-systems analysis to the coloniality (of power), very similar to IC, and use the single Internal Colony framework for analyzing African American communities nationally. Thus the advocates (Bush and Allen among them) of the single African American colony assessment have reiterated a strong case for their approach. The strength of Rod Bush’s argument is demonstrated by his consistency with that of Allen’s perspective.

Rod was well-versed in the history of the “Internal Colonial analogy,” having outlined it in some detail in “The Internal Colony Hybrid.” Rod aimed, in his own words, to

... view the concept of internal colony more in structural terms and assess the impact of such structural relations on the development of hybrid cultures among the internally colonized populations and, consequently, on how these populations come to view themselves as change agents within the landscape of these societies. (Bush 2008:130)

In that article, “The Internal Colony Hybrid,” Rod asserted that he follows “the lead of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, who argues that the coloniality of power (which is heir to the colonial situation) accounts for the formulation of a worldwide system of social classification based on the idea of race” (parentheses in original, Bush 2008:133).

Rod added that he also agreed with Kelvin Santiago-Valles, “whose definition of the colonized is not dependent on the territorial formulation, but on ... substandard conditions of life associated mostly with those groups who are identified with racially depreciated labor” (Bush 2008:133).

Thus my perspective is that Rod Bush’s affinity with world-systems analysis laid the foundation for his continued support for the one diasporic colony approach to all African American communities. The single diasporic colony is defined as existing everywhere systematically
oppressed and exploited as Black Americans live, from New York and Miami, to Chicago, to Seattle to Los Angeles, etc.

Rod noted that “[Pinderhughes] also includes some remnants of a too-singular focus on juridico-political territories that I [Bush] feel has been a hindrance to effective theorizing” (bracket content added, Bush 2008:149). That was his terminology for my approach of defining each contiguous Black community as its own colony.

Yet Rod was also somewhat ambivalent about his continued embrace of the single colony concept. At one point in his “Hybrid” article (Bush 2008:152) he critiqued the single colony idea before deciding that he was not ready to give up on it:

To my mind, Pinderhughes seems on the whole correct when he insists that the definition of the entire domestic diaspora inside of the US as a single colony is not functional. If one does not have a single geographic location, then how does one carry out democratic reforms and administrative transformation?

Pinderhughes’s response to this conundrum is to view each individual location as its own internal colony (Pinderhughes 2007:23).

But if one hews to the geographic rather than the socio-structural logic of coloniality, it lends to the domination of strategy over analysis, which seems to be a reversal of the order of successful praxis.

Rod drew upon world-systems analysis to reframe IC as almost synonymous with coloniality.

Rod Bush also moved me from a position of skepticism regarding coloniality in the world-systems analysis framework, to one of incorporating connections with world-systems analysis within my 8-point framework¹, in part resulting in point 7—seeking commonality among other theories of social oppression (Pinderhughes 2009:135-141). Thus Rod influenced my elaboration of point 7 in two ways: In addition to encouraging me toward a positive understanding of coloniality and world-systems analysis, he helped me realize

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¹. This framework is elaborated upon in the next section of this chapter.
that harmonious analyses are possible that draw connections with frameworks that initially posit themselves as hostile to ICT.

Rod was open and very collegial while uniting with me on most of the points of my framework for analyzing IC even as he differed with me on the existence of numerous internal Black colonies. As I discuss below, I adapted the model of this approach in my analysis by refuting direct but flawed critiques of IC while also showing that the analytical frameworks of those critics could be united with through this new (geo-focused) ICT. Instead of becoming mired in intensely competing either/or paradigms, Rod’s example helped me focus on building connections even with analyses that require some (but not extensive) critical correction.

My view is that world-systems analysis does not emphasize political initiative sufficiently; agency is de-emphasized a bit more than I am comfortable with, although the utility for contextualization (describing the structures of oppression and exploitation) of world-systems analysis has earned my appreciation. Regarding the concept of coloniality, originally my skepticism was very strong, since one of the first articles that I read on the subject mis-defined coloniality as including a hodgepodge of intersectional oppressive ideas. Rod helped me understand that the coloniality of power in world-systems analysis is more focused and precise than an approach claiming that multiple forms of oppression somehow automatically equal coloniality.

In my current understanding world-systems analysts use coloniality to reference hierarchical, ideological, and cultural structures rooted in the colonized experience that remain in formerly colonized lands, and that can also exist beyond the borders of the colonies or former colonies. My assessment is that the concept of coloniality should be viewed as supplementary to IC but not a substitute term. For example, coloniality, but not IC, was involved in the Trayvon Martin case, which took place in a Florida suburb.

My key analytic difference with Rod Bush, that IC should be geographically defined, to me appears pivotal in order to confront directly the casual dismissal of ICT by some scholars as merely an “analogy.” Characterizing Internal Colonial Analysis as an analogy
appears necessary to advocate that African Americans are a single colony although dispersed all over the U.S. Yet, claiming the analogy of a single internal (non-contiguous) colony also embraces a weakness in that argument for IC. It can be argued that claiming the analogy limits the Black experience in America to being merely like colonialism instead of an actual precise form of colonialism.

My preference is to define a colony as settler confiscated land plus the land on which the colonized reside. Then, regardless of declared independence by the colonizers, unless the conditions of the colonized are equalized to that of the dominant population, those geographic concentrations of systematic subordination (the colonies—of the colonized) are quite durable and will continue to exist, even if they move and are re-concentrated (the colony/colonies are re-formed) in another location.

IV. The New, Geo-Focused, ICT

Beyond pointing out this notable difference regarding geographic analysis, it is vital to explore briefly where Rod Bush and I agreed regarding 21st century ICT. These points of agreement are especially important since they seem to be the basis of what attracted Rod to become a staunch supporter of my work, even though he disagreed gently but strongly with my first point, which is:

1. Defining colonialism as a geographically-based pattern of subordination of a differentiated population with each geographically separate territory as a distinct colony (hence the term ‘geo focused’) (italics, quotation marks and parentheses in the original, Pinderhughes 2011:251). Again, Rod was such a strong supporter of my work on ICT that, despite his firm disagreement with Point 1, he literally had no differences with the other 7 points of my re-appraisal;

2. Applying a class analysis for sociologically diagramming class interests and dynamics (within each Internal Colony);
3. *Describing* a colonized people’s continuous development from the start of their subjection to the present;

4. *Including* gender, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of social oppression (in harmony with intersectional analyses);

5. *Outlining* the colony’s division of labor as it relates to the dominant country’s economy;

6. *Identifying* the three major ways to abolish a colony: collective assimilation, ethnic cleansing, and positive abolition;

7. *Seeking* commonality with other (major) social theories of (especially racial) oppression; and

8. *Elaborating* a framework that presses for maintaining historical and political context when ICT is debated and critiqued. (bracket content added, Pinderhughes 2011:251).

Previously (i.e. when applying Classic ICT), IC theorists had a variety of answers to several of the issues demarcated in these Eight Points. For example, class analysis was used by some theorists (Allen 1969, Hechter 1975) but not others (Blauner 1969 & 1972, Staples 1975). Still other issues have often been only partially addressed, such as describing the history of a colonized people’s development, inclusion of other dimensions of social oppression (during what Rod Bush describes as “the heyday of the internal colonial concept”—the height of the Black Power Era—theorizing about dimensions of oppression by gender and sexual orientation had barely begun). Debate concerning ICT also includes the issue of economics and the Internal Colonial economic model.

My approach insists upon identification of the economic role of a colony but does not require an assessment of whether or not “super-profits” are derived by the dominant power (Pinderhughes 2009:106).
I have not seen published arguments regarding the last 3 points, (6) abolition of a colony, (7) seeking commonality with other theories of oppression, and (8) a framework for debating IC.

#6. The definitions of 3 major means to abolish a colony:

- **Collective spontaneous assimilation** (ex. the Italian, Jewish, Irish, etc., internal colonies of the early 20th century);
- **Ethnic cleansing** (some Native American tribes, the government response to Katrina in New Orleans, and now Detroit after de-industrialization); and
- **Positive abolition** (the systematic application of social policies seeking equality of result, not just opportunity).

The requirement of the delineation of colonial abolition may be the most important element in the geo-focused Internal Colonial Analytical framework. This specification of abolition essentially requires the description of abolition from those attempting to critique or even ignore the continuing application of ICT.

#7. The requirement of connecting with multiple theories that explore (especially racial) oppression (including Racial Formation Theory, World-Systems Analysis, and Critical Race Theory); and

#8. The constraint that context, both political and historical, ground any future debates about ICT.

Rod Bush strongly embraced the last 7 points as important for the re-assertion of the validity and utility of ICT, regardless of our differences on that first point.

V. Conclusion

In my view where 21st century ICT stands, and where Rod Bush stood and demonstrated his leadership in thinking about the subject, may be summarized as follows.

Regarding class analysis in the context of IC, Rod Bush believed that “The professional-managerial strata from these populations are incorporated into the class structure of the larger system through affirmative action and programs of diversity, a program of limited
integration or assimilation of these strata into the larger society” (2008:163).

He connected the modern prison system and its mass incarceration practices with IC, stating “The withdrawal of the state from inner-city sites of concentrated poverty, or what I would call internally colonized populations, led to replacement by a carceral state” (2008:163).

And most importantly, when he used ICT to understand and promote social change to aid the social transformation of Internal Colonies, he stated:

The old order is now in a period of transition, and the delinking of these internal colonies from the centers of power will constitute a significant and strategic rebuilding of old structures of power, knowledge, and being. It will foster a situation in which we are not likely to have a new system with global designs, but a system with a true plurality of centers, not of a universal society, but a pluri-versal one, where there is a genuine right of difference. (Bush 2008:163-164)

Rod Bush encouraged ideas, whether he completely agreed with them or not. He mentored with love, pressing the positive, embracing agreement even as he stated nuanced differences, gently but clearly. I am sure that if he were here today, Rod would have continued our dialogue regarding Internal Colonialism Theory.

Rod Bush loved both his students and his academic comrades-in-struggle. His openness to helping promote alternative ideas that even clearly conflicted with his own is rare in my experience. Rod embraced the potential that he saw in others and pushed them to achieve. I am very grateful to have known and been mentored by Rod Bush.

Abstract

This essay authored by Charles Pinderhughes, titled “My Dialogue with Rod Bush on Internal Colonialism,” is a chapter in the anthology Rod Bush: Lessons from a Radical Black Scholar on Liberation, Love, and Justice, edited by Melanie E. L. Bush, and co-edited by Rose M. Brewer, Daniel Douglas, Loretta Chin, and Robert Newby (2019). The chapter discusses Rod Bush’s generous capacity to mentor and support academic comrades. Bush’s unselfish example led to a new approach to a part of
Charles Pinderhughes’ re-assessment of Internal Colonialism Theory. Lessons to be learned from Rod Bush include supporting the principled engagement of ideas, being generous with our commentary, and engaging in dialogue to cultivate understanding rather than to make points or to be right. Bush supported Charles Pinderhughes’ development of Geo-focused Internal Colonialism Theory even though he [Bush] partially disagreed with some of the change advocated.

Author

Charles “Cappy” Pinderhughes, Jr., as a veteran Black community and labor activist for over thirty years, organized with many community organizations of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. He worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and was Lieutenant of Information for the New Haven Chapter of the Black Panther Party. Pinderhughes earned a Ph.D. in Sociology from Boston College as well as a Masters in Political Science from Goddard College. His fields of specialization focus on racial & ethnic relations, social movements, historical sociology, Black Power Studies and Anticolonial Marxism. His main sociological research is a re-assessment of internal colonialism theory—the analysis that ghettos, barrios and reservations are 21st century internal colonies—which echoes that claim by two centuries of Black activists. He is author of “Toward a New Theory of Internal Colonialism.” Pinderhughes is currently Assistant Professor of Sociology at Essex County College.

Reference


