

neocolonialism and the

FIRST NATIONS

by Howard Adams

*The following text is the sixth in a series of chapters abridged from **A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization** by Metis activist Howard Adams, published by permission of the author. The first (1995) edition of the book has been sold out, but a revised edition, with additional chapters on the national question and the Zapatista movement, is now available from **Theytus Books**.*

Following the end of World War II, Third World colonies went through a great change in their relationships with the imperial nations of the West. Colonialism in its imperialist form had a relationship of direct political domination. As colonies under direct control of their imperialist colonizers, they provided important resources to the mother country. By 1945, however, the colonial system had come under serious pressure from oppressed indigenous peoples. The intensity of this oppression provoked resistance and revolts throughout Third World colonies.

In order for neocolonialism to come into existence, certain factors had to come together at the same time. The first thing that surfaced was dissent against the old imperial conquerors, usually England, France, Spain and Portugal. Secondly, a small group of Aboriginal elites emerged as leaders. Finally, foreign multinational corporations financially invaded the colony.

To the colonial masses, this combination of forces appeared as a national independence movement. However, when things had settled down, the colony and its people had achieved very little in their so-called independence. In some cases, the only changes were in personalities. The new class of Native rulers simply took over the old imperial institutions, such as parliament, the bureaucracy and judicial system. The indigenous people continued to be equally repressed, exploited and impoverished by the same old imperial institutions.

The decline of imperialism did not mean the end of foreign domination. What had not changed was the form and structure through which this domination was exercised. The direct political control of the colonies was replaced by a more complex mechanism of indirect domination. In theory, the new independent nations had all the outward trappings of national sovereignty; but in reality, their economic and political system was directed by foreign multinational corporations.

Neocolonialism is more subtle and better camouflaged than imperialism with its brutal methods. But it is also arguably more dangerous and more difficult to expose, combat and defeat.

In sovereign nation-states such as Canada, Australia and

New Zealand, Aboriginal people live under conditions relatively equivalent to those in South Africa under apartheid. In Canada, Indian, Metis and Inuit communities constitute internal colonies. Canada was a colony of European imperialism that emerged with institutions and structures of racism and colonization that are very similar to most African and Asian colonies. Hence, we must view our political and economic situation from a critical Third World perspective.

During the 1950s, when the colonized had no means of supporting themselves, many Indians and Metis migrated to towns and cities. Realizing that it was ill-equipped to deal with thousands of unemployed Natives in a white and hostile urban environment, the government adjusted its strategy, shrewdly suppressing Natives with meagre welfare, and promises of future employment through job-training programs. For us, who had long been segregated from the mainstream economy by colonial policies, welfare only made us more dependent on the colonizer. Canada's Native people were legislated into a state of perpetual poverty.

This continued until the 1960s, when our awakening political consciousness threatened the establishment. The grassroots movement for civil rights, national liberation, and class struggle was a battle to restructure colonial administration and regain control of our lives.

Lacking experience in dealing with such a newly demanding population, the state turned to the small group of educated Native elites. Beginning in the 1960s, Canadian governments developed programs of regular meetings and conferences with Aboriginal elites. Resolutions were passed, expectations were raised, and recommendations were forwarded to the appropriate bureaucratic departments. However, these gatherings were just staged performances where time-worn resolutions were rehashed only to be shelved once again. The governments failed to act on almost all the proposals. The state never intended to help us; it had its own agenda.

It appeared to the public that the government was steering away from colonial management and guiding Natives to pseudo-independence. With the help of white liberals, the state set up agencies such as Friendship Centres, Native Alcoholic Counselling Houses, job assistant programs, and >>>

education centres in towns and cities with large Native populations. Like the social, educational, and alcoholism programs on reserves, these centres promoted conservative ideologies and assimilation. Those Metis and Indians who received some benefits developed a greater dependency on the state, and their political consciousness was smothered. The state was determined to deactivate and to suppress the native movement promoting self-determination and political and economic liberation.

Education is the master of the assimilation programs. In Regina, status Indians have their own college, which grants bachelor degrees in several disciplines but they are basically Eurocentric. There are Native Studies Departments at almost every large university in Canada. There are also special university programs to train Aboriginals to become lawyers, administrators, and managers. Every program is oriented specifically toward creating an Aboriginal bourgeois class to act as a bridge to the impoverished masses and to help control and oppress them.

As in African or Asian neocolonial nations, Canada's indigenous people have been denied the means to be self-sufficient. The power of local Native councils is intimately dependent on government funding and patronage. Despite their privileged status within their communities, the Native bourgeois are marginalized by the mainstream. Many serve the colonizers' interests to maintain the privileges that come with helping the enemy.

The most significant change that has occurred since our struggle began in the 60s is the transformed economic conditions of the internal colonies. Private corporations in forestry, oil, uranium, water, power, and fishing have been operating within Aboriginal territory, and they have been receiving government subsidies. Likewise, grants have been given to Aboriginal entrepreneurs operating relatively large businesses.

For instance, the Saskatchewan Meadow Lake Tribal Council has been granted permission to harvest a large section of the province's northwest forests. The council sells the raw logs to NorSask Forest Products. Economically, this tribal council operates as a private company. The council clear-cuts forests and pays its Indian workers low wages.

When the federal government restructures itself into a neocolonial system, it shifts the administrative control of programs, such as welfare, job training, and maintenance of reserves and

villages to band councils or Metis village councils. Metis and Indians working in the bureaucracy create the illusion that fundamental changes are being made, and the Aboriginals could function on an equal footing in mainstream society. The state parades these councils and elites as success models for Indians and Metis to follow; it creates a mirage of self-government.

The establishment also used what were clearly dishonest employment programs. After the government stopped bussing Natives to sugar beet fields, it implemented job-training programs and promised each individual a better future. Training programs were used to hire Metis and Indians at minimum wage to perform maintenance work in the provincial infrastructure. Natives were supposed to become skilled workers, after which time they would qualify for union wages. However, the government kept Indian and Metis workers on the same programs for as long as ten years without a pay increase.

In neocolonialism, the government makes it known that funding is available for Aboriginal programs and job creation. Many Native organizations, already well on their way to becoming bureaucratic, find it is much easier to busy themselves with hiring researchers and developing trendy programs, rather than pursue the struggle for liberation.

As neocolonialism advanced through the 1960s, it gradually gained control over the Aboriginal liberation movement and stalled development of Native self-determination. Federal and provincial governments used their substantial funding to break the Native struggle for a progressive political ideology and collective economic base. By the 1980s, it became clear that Aboriginal puppet organizations and their leaders had defused Native activism. The successful use of Natives to control Natives by abusing wealth and power has proven that the original Native revolutionaries were on the right track.

Today, most Aboriginals live as they did before the 1960s. Alcoholism is still prevalent, welfare is once again the primary means of survival, and suicides and school dropout rates are extremely high. Rather than working together, Aboriginal elites foster suspicion and internal conflicts. Those who oppose the leaders are denied benefits, services, and decent housing. The collaborators and the state work hand in hand for their respective self-interests.

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