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# Introduction: Internal Colonialism

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This introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* explains the origins of the roundtable marking the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Michael Hechter's study *Internal Colonialism* (1975). It also shows how the two accompanying articles, by Jocelyn Zimmerman and Freya McMorrow, touch on themes that are treated in Hechter's influential book.

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This issue of the *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* takes its inspiration from a recent anniversary. The year 2025 marked fifty years since the first appearance of a landmark study in the literature on British state-formation: Michael Hechter's *Internal Colonialism* (London, 1975). Hechter's work has since been revised (in 1998), but the central tenets of his argument retain their power and purchase, still prompting both reflection and criticism. As Hechter summarised his view, the book 'tried to account for the bitter sea which separates England from the Celtic fringe'.[1] Rather than suggesting a diffusionist model of social development, whereby the peripheral societies come to mimic that of the core, Hechter posited:

> altogether different consequences resulting from heightened core-peripheral interaction. According to this [internal colonial] model, structural inequalities between the regions should increase, as the periphery develops in a dependent mode. Individuals of the core culture

1. Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (1975; London, paperback 1978), 341.

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> are expected to dominate high prestige roles in the social structure of the peripheral regions, as is the situation in overseas colonies.[2]

This paralleling of internal and overseas structural dominance is what gives the terminological insistence on 'colonialism' its purchase. And as Hechter insists in studying the development of the British archipelago, 'the findings tended to support the predictions of the internal colonial model, at least with respect to Wales, Scotland and Ireland'.[3] The result was the germination of internal conflict as multiple articulations of ethnic identity contested for recognition and resource. But it also created, in the case of Britain, a hyper-centralised state, one which accorded with the contemporary study of the British question, Tom Nairn's *The Break-Up of Britain*, first published two years after Hechter's intervention.[4]

For Hechter, internal colonialism has two distinct facets.[5] First, 'industrialization did not diffuse into the peripheral areas in the same form as it had developed in the core. When industrialization did penetrate the periphery, it was in a dependent mode; consequently production was highly specialised and geared for export'.[6] Second, 'industrialization did not lead to the establishment of a national culture'.[7] Britishness, in other words, remained the preserve of an elite, while English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh identities developed in tandem, as both core and peripheral forms of national cultural expression.

As Hechter accepted even when he first wrote the work, 'these findings remain merely suggestive'.[8] Yet while the specific details have been assailed and re-narrated, the historical reach and comparative nature of the book has helped it to endure as a landmark in the development of the literature surrounding British identity, and in that concerned with Irish and Scottish studies.[9]

In shaping the roundtable, the editors, Michael Brown and Anthony Jarrells, have sought to reflect both the ways in which Hechter's book generated excitement and provoked new thought when it appeared, and how it has been taken

2. Ibid., 344.
3. Ibid., 344.
4. Tom Nairn, *The Break Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (1977; London, 1981).
5. For assessments of the literature on internal colonialism, which draws more broadly on its use as a concept in political science, see Norma Beatriz Chaloult and Yves Chaloult, 'The Internal Colonialism Concept: Methodological Considerations', *Social and Economic Studies*, 28 (1979), 85–99; Robert J. Hind, 'The Internal Colonial Concept', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26 (1984), 543–68; John R. Chávez, 'Aliens in their Native Lands: The Persistence of Internal Colonial Theory', *Journal of World History*, 22 (2011), 785–809.
6. Hechter, *Internal Colonialism*, 345.
7. Ibid., 345.
8. Ibid., 345.
9. For criticism of the book, see, in particular, Edward Page, 'Michael Hechter's *Internal Colonialism*: Some Theoretical and Methodological Problems', *European Journal of Political Research*, 6 (1978), 295–317.

up and assessed in the years that have followed. And if one of the central themes that emerged in the discussion below is the relevance and power of Hechter's understanding of uneven economic development on the trajectory of the emergent British state, so too there is some discussion of the second element of his argument: namely the influence of British state development, and its economic history, on the shaping of the four national cultures and the form that Britishness has taken. And it is intended that this second strand will be foregrounded in a second set of reflections the editors are commissioning, which is scheduled to appear in a forthcoming issue of *Studies in Scottish Literature*.

The roundtable is followed by two essays that might be read usefully as working in dialogue with Hechter's overarching thesis. Since Hechter wrote, the role of Celtic actors in the development of the British Empire has come into increasing focus. Jocelyn Zimmerman contributes to that understanding by offering a close analysis of the language used by Scottish colonial agents to narrate their romantic and sexual liaisons in India within correspondence to family and friends. And in Freya McMorrow's study of the sense of wellbeing, which is elicited by learning the Irish language in the contemporary society, she highlights how language politics remains a kinetic question in the development and articulation of Celtic nationalities.

Taken as a whole, the issue highlights how fertile and fecund the debate Hechter helped to shape has been, and how literary, archival and social science work is still informed by his treatment of state formation in the *longue durée* across the territories which concern us here.