

## Online Article

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# Reclaiming the African Past and Present with Walter Rodney

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On reading a book manuscript submitted for publication by Walter Rodney, the General Manager of Tanzania Publishing House expressed his limitations in judging its quality as a work of history telling. As such, he proposed sending the manuscript to an authority on African history for review. There is nothing surprising about this. It is what publishers do; they send manuscripts under consideration to be reviewed by specialists in the field. What is unusual, audacious, is Walter Rodney's response to the publisher. Part of which reads:

"The main request you made is that the manuscript should be passed on to an African historian, because you felt yourself unequal to the task of judging its worth as 'serious history'. It is an ideological challenge. Unfortunately, there is scarcely anyone about, who combines my own world-view with data about the African past. My procedure has been to try as hard as possible to let the work be scrutinised by progressive individuals. To pass it on to a serious bourgeois historian would be a sheer waste of time. Under the circumstance, I will have to be the authority for whether a given fact, date, name, etc., is correct. Beyond that, it is a matter of interpretation, logical and internal consistency. The text aims at a stratum of literate Africans in

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universities, secondary schools, the bureaucracy and the like. They will have to judge whether it makes sense in the light of present conditions in Africa."

"There is scarcely anyone about, who combines my own world-view with data about the African past." Walter Rodney was 29 years of age when he wrote those words. He was 30 when the manuscript in question was published as *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. He was not laying claim to a unique world view or posturing as the most knowledgeable person on Africa's past. He was drawing attention to a rare mixture in the academy, which carried consequences. He knew beforehand the venerated authorities on African history in Britain and the US would respond with hostility. The very title would strike them as heresy, never mind its content, if they got that far. To the extent that these experts featured in Rodney's imagining of an audience for the book, he made it known that his aim was "to upset and not please the Deans of African History in London and Wisconsin."

A core constituent of the world-view Rodney saw as having no home in the corridors of academia, patrolled by those Deans, has a lineage to which he was exposed from an early age. Like Eric Williams before him, and CLR James before Williams, and the author of *Das Kapital* before them all, Rodney saw boundless relationships between the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, and the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production, to borrow the imagery and eloquence of Marx on the subject. Though my preference on the mercantilist aspects of this history is the poetry of the prophet, Bob Marley: "Old pirates yes they rob I,/ sold I to the merchant ships,/ minutes after they took I,/ from the bottomless pit."

Rodney stood on the shoulders of a black radical tradition that challenged hegemonic ideas on the absence of African participation in the making of history, as they explored Africa and Africans glaring presence in the making of the modern world. Significantly, he had the inclination, as well as opportunities, to ask and pursue more questions than they, on social processes within Africa itself. And not remain largely focused on transatlantic connections between Africa, Europe and the Americas. It was in 1963 at London's School of Ori-

ental and African Studies, SOAS, that he fully embarked on these pursuits.

Founded in 1916 to help prepare British officials in the arts of colonial administration, SOAS evolved in the second half of the twentieth century into a leading centre for the study of African history. On the other side of the Atlantic, major African Studies centres also emerged, at universities such as Wisconsin and Northwestern, as American power scrambled to understand and influence decolonisations in Africa. The founding fathers of these programmes, in which mothers, daughters and others were kept at bay, had their own creation myth, in which they became the founding fathers of the study of Africa, having secured their precincts from Black pioneers.

If Rodney further developed his world-view at SOAS, it was accomplished by navigating the interstices of an intellectual tradition that did not see capitalism as present in Europe's encounter with Africa. In fact, it is not apparent they saw capitalism present anywhere, at anytime.

*A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545–1800*, the book produced from Rodney's PhD thesis of the same title, contains building blocks that go into the making of *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* and other expositions by Rodney on the African past and present. Those who think Rodney's hostile reception from the Deans of African history in Britain and the US, began with *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, the book with an awful title and no footnotes, should look closer at their response to *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast* and other scholarship by Rodney on the European slave trade in Africa.

Before Walter Rodney, and that's a phrase which should always appear in any assessment of the study of the European slave trade in Africa, the dominant paradigm in the academy treated the European slave trade in Africa as just another form of commerce, directed by the invisible hand of the market. Africans and Europeans met in the marketplace and exchanged goods, with benefits accruing to each other in an equal trading relationship. A sampling of how this worked is offered by a proponent, and a SOAS founding father of the study of African history, John Fage. In an article published almost ten years after Rodney's death, in the journal, *Past and Present* (Nov., 1989, No. 125, p. 103), he had yet another swipe at his nemesis, for suggesting there was unequal exchange which engendered underdevelopment in Africa.

Fage writes:

The Africans might indeed be cheated – for example, being sold muskets which were not very good and which might burst when they were fired. But equally they could cheat the Europeans – for example, by passing off old, sick or mentally handicapped slaves as though they were in the pink of condition. The maxim *caveat emptor* worked both ways.

So, there we have it, Europeans sold Africans dodgy firearms and Africans sold Europeans dodgy human beings. What more balanced a trading relationship does Rodney require.

And it seems the practice of Africans cheating Europeans by offloading human cargo not fit for purpose, continued into Fage's African history kingdom. In the same article, he goes on to pres-

ent Rodney as a dodgy West Indian historian, finding him driven by Black emotion and ideological affiliations. Quite unlike this Dean of African history, a white British middle class male, able to stand back from a history of empire in which he has no history, devoid of emotion and ideology, and clinically examine the reality of Africa, as he puts it.

For Rodney, the European slave trade created ruptures within African social formations, robbing large areas of its most able-bodied populations, eroding mercantile and manufacturing systems within Africa. In his analysis of contemporary African underdevelopment, he draws a connection from this era into the period of colonial rule. The processes he observed did not begin at the end of the nineteenth century with the Berlin Conference. Africa's internal dynamics at the level of economy and politics had already been compromised by the time the continent was partitioned into areas called Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, all the phoney phones, as Tajudeen Abdul Raheem, was fond of saying.

It is not an easy task for the younger generations before us in Africa to dwell on these legacies of slave trades, slavery, and imperialism, now sanitised as a cuddly toy named globalisation. I speak of a generation living with predatory and contemptuous ruling classes, that sit atop ever widening inequalities, and the accompanying immiseration of the lives of working people. Forget about glossy brochures in the City and Wall Street announcing a rapidly expanding African middle class, getting ready to consume their products.

I speak of a generation that has been gleeful about Covid border closures preventing political elites from travelling abroad for medical care, leaving behind non-existent or depleted health services. A generation that has travelled a new middle passage across deserts and Mediterranean waters, seeking escape to a Europe that awaits them with a nationalism grown malignant once more. A nationalism in which race and empire have long been at the heart of its constructs.

A generation, from Lagos to Harare, Kinshasha to Khartoum, Bamako to too many places, that has been shot at and killed by coercive agents as they begin to transcend fault lines of ethnicity, region, religion, and gender in the course of struggle. Struggles against the policies and manipulations of ravenous local ruling classes as Rodney described them.

Their exasperation with narratives on colonialism is understandable, but not one we should conflate with the founding fathers of African studies and too many of their sponsors and progenitors, who have tended to see colonialism as a modernising project, ruined by Africans who know not of good governance. Exasperation notwithstanding, there is no escaping the use of a rear-view mirror if analysis and action are to travel significant distances, into a future that brings alternatives and not rearrangements.

Walter Rodney had a profound grasp of Africa's integration into an international system of production in which the engines were kept outside the continent, from the sixteenth century into the early years of neoliberalism, the shorthand language we use to characterise a four-decade old multifaceted onslaught on the lives of working people around the globe.

His interests, however, did not end with these structural concerns. With Rodney, they generally ended where they began: with the lives of ordinary working people, how they sought to make their way in the world and how these structural arrangements impeded or assisted. Those interests led him to a penchant for social class analysis, now considered a throwback to a bygone age by many opinion makers, including some classified as progressives.

Frantz Fanon, who gifted us rare insights into the malleability of race in our time, provided important openings for Rodney's thinking on those who inherited office at independence in Africa. Often forgotten is how prescient was Fanon on the trajectory of the embryonic middle classes inheriting state power in Africa. They were barely entering office when he began anticipating tragedy down the road if they took command in the absence of grounding with the people, whose vitality and clamour for change gave substance to independence movements.

The mobilisations for political independence may have been all class affairs, but it was a particular class that held tightly to the reins of power when it came, reaping an inordinate share of social surpluses that filtered through the state. In too many instances there were feeding frenzies around the state, which became key to the consolidation and reproduction of a class with little basis in production, argued Rodney, in texts and speeches that are too little known. The pursuit of their interests, their self-aggrandisements, helped consign them to perpetuating relations of dependence in an untransformed colonial economy. Archie Mafeje, brilliant intellectual from South Africa

and colleague of Walter in Dar es Salaam, once put it to me as: elites scrambling to eat the fruits of independence, then eating independence itself as the fruits dried up.

Walter Rodney always acknowledged he was a member of the class he critiqued in Africa and the Caribbean, the class that banned him from Jamaica and thought they would keep him out of his native Guyana by denying him employment. His education propelled him into their ranks, but he signed up early for Amilcar Cabral's class suicide brigade. The revolutionary leader of Guinea Bissau's independence movement theorised that while having a major contribution to make toward meaningful national liberation, the middle classes could only do so by resisting the interests on their class and finding common cause with the working people to decolonising Africa.

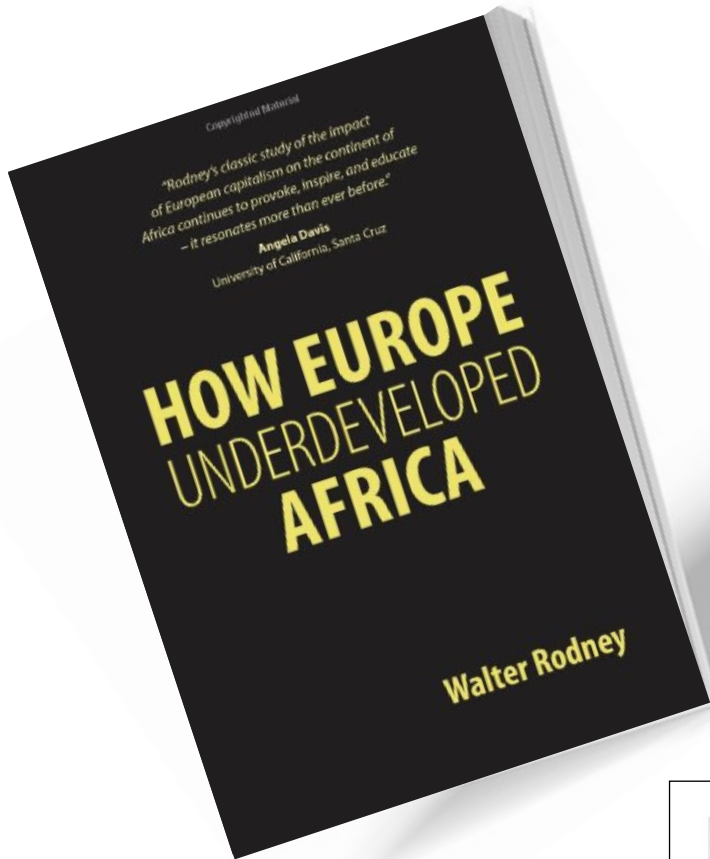
I knew a die-hard cynic on the potential of the postcolonial middle classes in Africa and the Caribbean to effect progressive change, who once quipped that when Cabral spoke of suicide, he had a gun at hand, as leader of an armed insurrection against Portuguese rule. And what he really meant was: you had better commit class suicide or I will commit murder.

There was no gun at Walter's head when in the preface of his 1966 SOAS doctoral thesis, he thanked the irredentist masses of the West Indies for his inspiration to study Africa, and, moreover, for the finances that made possible his education. All that he accomplished in the next fourteen years, from deconstructing the messages on Africa's past and present controlled by the Deans of African Studies, to grounding with wananchi, the people, wherever and whenever he

found them, makes pellucid that his preface was no radical chic before radical chic was fully in vogue. He behaved as though the

labour of every toiler everywhere contributed to his education. And placing his extraordinary intellectual abilities at their service was no

act of charity, as much as a vocation necessary for fashioning another world.



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Walter Rodney's groundbreaking analysis, republished in conjunction with the Walter Rodney Foundation and with a new preface by Patricia Rodney, shows how the wealthy countries and international capitalism bear major responsibility for impoverishing Africa. This revolutionary text remains an essential introduction to the dynamics of Africa's relations with the West.

*"A milestone in the history of Africa thinking for itself!"*

Samir Amin, director of the Forum du Tiers Monde (Third World Forum), Dakar

*"Walter Rodney's magisterial opus is recognised globally as a landmark in African studies, not to mention the history of colonialism and imperialism. Beautifully written and expertly argued, it is that rare book that can be called a classic. It belongs on every bookshelf."*

Gerald Horne, historian, author, activist

*"A masterpiece of historical analysis that has remained both pointed and relevant in spite of the passage of time."*

Adebayo Olukoshi, director of the UN African Institute for Economic Development and Planning

*"As the world capitalist system is showing signs of collapse, Walter Rodney's brilliant study is re-emerging as a classic which Pan-Africanists should read and re-read."*

Issa G. Shivji, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Research Chair in Pan-African Studies, University of Dar es Salaam

*"Every person in Africa and of African descent, and every European, would be the richer for studying this text and taking its lessons to heart."*

Norman Girvan, Professor Emeritus, University of the West Indies

*"This book is a legendary classic that galvanised freedom fighters around the world. We miss Walter Rodney but we do have his great witness and work!"*

Cornel West, philosopher, author, critic, activist and prominent member of the Democratic Socialists of America

*"Walter Rodney's seminal and revolutionary text has nurtured generations of radical thinkers all over the world and has become prophetic in its scathing relevance for today's militarised globalisation and the new hi-tech corporate scramble for Africa."*

Amina Mama, director of the Women and Gender Studies program, University of California, Davis



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