



Remembering Walter Rodney's Invaluable Legacy

By Lee Wengraf



A number of African economies have experienced a massive boom in wealth and investment over the past decade. Yet most ordinary Africans live in dire poverty, with diminished life expectancy and high unemployment and in societies with low levels of industrialisation. For the roots of these conditions of “under-development,” one historical account stands alone in importance: Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972).

Walter Rodney was a scholar, working class militant and revolutionary from Guyana. Influenced by Marxist ideas, he is central to the Pan-Africanist canon for many on the left. In *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Rodney situates himself in several theoretical traditions: the writings of Caribbean revolutionary Frantz Fanon, the dependency theories of Andre Gunder Frank and others, the Pan-Africanist tradition, including George Padmore and C.L.R. James, and African socialism as popularised by national leaders such as Tanzania’s Julius Kambarage Nyerere and Guinea’s Ahmed Sékou Touré. As Horace Campbell describes, “His [Rodney’s] numerous writings on the subjects of socialism, imperialism, working class struggles and Pan Africanism and slavery contributed to a body of knowledge that came to be known as the Dar es Salaam School of Thought. Issa Shivji, Mahmood Mamdani, Claude Ake, Archie Mafeje, Yash Tandon, John Saul, Dan Nabudere, O Nnoli, Clive Thomas and countless others participated in the debates on transformation and liberation.”

Rodney's scholarship and leadership in the working-class movement thus had a long reach, including within the revolutionary movement in his native Guyana. He was assassinated on June 13, 1980, likely by agents of the Guyanese government. The Nigerian novelist, Wole Soyinka, in noting Rodney's legacy, wrote how "Walter Rodney was no captive intellectual playing to the gallery of local or international radicalism. He was clearly one of the most solidly ideologically situated intellectuals ever to look colonialism and exploitation in the eye and where necessary, spit in it."

Rodney's work has assumed a foundational place in understanding the legacies of slavery and colonialism in the underdevelopment that unfolded, over centuries, on the continent. The core of his analysis rests on the assumption that Africa - far from standing outside the world system - has been crucial to the growth of capitalism in the West. What he terms "underdevelopment" was in fact the product of centuries of slavery, exploitation and imperialism. Rodney conclusively shows that "Europe" - that is, the colonial and imperial powers - did not merely enrich their own empires but actually reversed economic and social development in Africa. Thus, in his extensive account of African history, from the early African empires through to the modern day, he shows how the West built immense industrial and colonial empires on the backs of African slave labour, devastating natural resources and African societies in the process. As he emphasises throughout *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, "[i]t would be an act of the most brazen fraud to weigh the social amenities provided during the colonial epoch against the exploitation, and to arrive at the conclusion that the good outweighed the bad."

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For Rodney, underdevelopment is a condition historically produced through capitalist expansion and imperialism, and very clearly not an intrinsic property of Africa itself. He thus situates underdevelopment within the contradictory process of capitalism, one that both creates value and wealth for the exploiters while immiserating the exploited.

Rodney writes:

The peasants and workers of Europe (and eventually the inhabitants of the whole world) paid a huge price so that the capitalists could make their profit from the human labour that always lies behind the machines...There was a period when the capitalist system increased the well-being of significant numbers of people as a by-product of seeking out profits for a few, but today the quest for profits comes into sharp conflict with people's demands that their material and social needs should be fulfilled.

As Rodney describes, African trade was central to its growth, most importantly through the slave trade from approximately 1445 to 1870, transforming Africa into a source of human raw material for the new colonies in North America and the Caribbean. It was to the three major powers involved in the slave trade - Britain, France and Portugal - that massive profits accrued. Trade with Africa was closely tied up with the growth of European port cities such as England's Liverpool, with the exchange of slaves for cheap industrial goods established as the primary motor for profits of European firms. Drawing on the work of Eric Williams's classic *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), among others, Rodney concludes that the slave trade provided England with the capital for the Industrial Revolution to take off and with the dominant edge over its rivals.

Yet as Rodney shows, the “development” of African societies was thwarted in this process of capital expansion, first and foremost through the lost labour potential due to the slave trade. From its economic foundation in slavery, the range of exports from Africa narrowed to just a few commodities, undermining the development of productive capacity in Africa itself. These trade relations meant that technological development stagnated, creating a barrier to innovation within Africa itself, even in regions not directly engaged in the slave trade, because of the distorting influence on relations overall. The result, concludes Rodney, was “a loss of development opportunity, and this is of the greatest importance...The lines of economic activity attached to foreign trade were either destructive, as slavery was, or at best purely extractive.”

The Scramble for Africa and its aftermath

The nineteenth century “race for Africa” broke out, with European “explorers” seeking out access to raw materials. By the 1870s, colonial powers had expanded into new African territory, primarily through the use of force, further consolidating imperial powers and rivalries. By 1876, on the eve of the “Scramble for Africa”, European powers controlled only 10 per cent of the continent, namely Algeria, Cape Colony, Mozambique and Angola. Yet after the infamous Berlin Conference of 1885 and the partition of Africa, “The number of genuinely independent states outside of Europe and the Americas could be counted on one hand - the remains of the Ottoman Empire, Thailand, Ethiopia and Afghanistan.”

Racist ideology justified and facilitated European imperialism in Africa as a “civilizing mission”. As Rodney remarks, “Revolutionary African thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral...spoke of colonialism having made Africans into objects of history. Colonised Africans, like pre-colonial African chattel slaves, were pushed around into positions which suited European interests and which were damaging to the African continent and its peoples.”

Nonetheless, Africans met European expansion with great resistance, targeting forced labour schemes and taxation, restrictive land ownership laws and later, imposed forced conscription during World War I. Workers went on strike and engaged in boycotts, and nationalist organisations - many of them illegal - were formed from the earliest days of colonial rule.

Yet African resistance during that period was caught between larger forces. The European “Scramble for Africa” subjected independent states to colonial rule, transforming peasant and trading societies within a short span of time into a wage labour and cash crop system. The increasingly intense economic competition in European capitalism that eventually exploded into World War I likewise spilled over into military clashes in Africa. Alliances between and against the various powers attempted to block each other’s rivals, with France and Britain seeking competing axes of control over the continent.

Colonial brutality was the standard practice across virtually the entire continent, with the chief aim of leveraging force to subdue resistance and to extract profits. Turning Africa into a conveyor belt for raw materials and industrial goods required transportation and communication systems and, as Rodney describes, a pacified - and minimally educated - labour force. The major powers on the continent set up administrative apparatuses that in some cases utilised local rulers, but, as Rodney writes, in no instance would the colonisers accept African self-rule. Infrastructure such as roads were built not only to facilitate the movement of commodities and machinery, but also that of the colonial armies and police relied upon to “discipline” the indigenous population - whether through the expulsion of people from their land or the forced cultivation of cash crops. Industrial development was thwarted in Africa itself because manufacturing and the processing of raw materials happened exclusively overseas.

Compradors and sell-outs

Europeans divide-and-conquer tactics allowed a tiny section of African rulers to back the annexation by one power versus another. As Rodney puts it, "One of the decisive features of the colonial system was the presence of Africans serving as economic, political or cultural agents of the European colonialists.... agents or 'compradors' already serving [their] interests in the pre-colonial period." Following Fanon on the role of local elites, Rodney is scathing in his contempt for the "puppets" of "metropolitan" capitalism, where "the presence of a group of African sell-outs is part of the definition of underdevelopment."

According to Rodney, "The colonisation of Africa and other parts of the world formed an indispensable link in a chain of events which made possible the technological transformation of the base of European capitalism." Copper from the Congo, iron from West Africa, chrome from Rhodesia and South Africa, and more, took capitalist development to unprecedented heights of what Rodney calls "investible surpluses". The tendency within the drive for profit towards innovation and scientific advancement built a "massive industrial complex," as Rodney described it. African trade not only generated economic growth and profits, but created capacity for future growth in what he called the "metropolises", meaning the global centres of political and economic power located in Europe.

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Colonial policies heightened exploitation, such as those preventing Africans from growing cash crops, which drove them into forced labour like the building of infrastructure to facilitate extraction. Thus, capital accumulation was derived at the expense of greatly-weakened African states and economies, effectively reversing previous development.

These two processes were dialectically related. As Rodney writes, "The wealth that was created by African labor and from African resources was grabbed by the capitalist countries of Europe; and in the second place, restrictions were placed upon African capacity to make the maximum use of its economic potential."

This process of underdevelopment only intensified over time: as Rodney points out, investment and "foreign capital" in colonial Africa was derived from past exploitation and provided the historical basis for further expansion. "What was called 'profits' in one year came back as 'capital' the next...What was foreign about the capital in colonial Africa was its ownership and not its initial source."

Development by contradiction

Rodney argued that development in the so-called "periphery" was proportional to the degree of independence from the "metropolis", a central tenet of the dependency theorists. He looked to state-directed, national development in the post-colonial period as a template for growth, a model proven - particularly in the years after Rodney's death - not to be viable. National development in Africa, as elsewhere, proved unable to overcome the legacy of colonialism and weak economies. The wake of such failures and the onset of global crises pushed many African states into the vice-grip of neoliberal structural adjustment "reforms" that brought only austerity and crushing Third World

debt.

These ideas had a distinctive imprint on Rodney's variant of Marxism and that of many leftists of his day. For Rodney, independence in Africa rested on "development by contradiction", by which he meant that the contradictions within African society were only resolvable by Africans' regaining their sovereignty as a people. In his view, the disproportionate weight and importance of even a small African working class offered potentially a more stable base of resistance.

However, he emphasises that this possibility cannot be fully realised as in the "developed" world because production in Africa proceeded on a different path than in Europe. In the latter, the destruction of agrarian and craft economies increased productive capacity through the development of factories and a mass working class. In Africa, he argues, that process was distorted: the local craft industry was destroyed, yet large-scale industry was not developed outside of agriculture and extraction, with workers restricted to the lowest-paid, most unskilled work. "Capitalism in the form of colonialism failed to perform in Africa the tasks which it had performed in Europe in changing social relations and liberating the forces of production. "So, concludes Rodney, the African working class is too small and too weak to play a liberatory role in the current period. Instead, somewhat reluctantly, he identifies the intelligentsia for that role:

Altogether, the educated played a role in African independence struggles far out of proportion to their numbers, because they took it upon themselves and were called upon to articulate the interests of all Africans. They were also required to...focus on the main contradiction, which was between the colony and the metropole...The contradiction between the educated and the colonialists was not the most profound...However, while the differences lasted between the colonizers and the African educated, they were decisive.

Thus, while Rodney sees the "principal divide" within capitalism as that between capitalists and workers, the revolutionary role for the African working class was nonetheless a task for another day. On this score, Rodney was mistaken: mass upheavals by workers across the continent have shown the capacity for struggle, from the colonial period up to the present day.

Crumbs from the colonial table

Yet, however contradictorily, Rodney's ideas on political leadership and liberation indicate the potential for resistance under today's conditions. First, as we have seen, Rodney - following Fanon - was keenly aware of the class contradictions embedded in the new African ruling classes, tensions bound to be thrust to the surface with greater clarity. He writes: "Most African leaders of the intelligentsia... were frankly capitalist, and shared fully the ideology of their bourgeois masters...As far as the mass of peasants and workers were concerned, the removal of overt foreign rule actually cleared the way towards a more fundamental appreciation of exploitation and imperialism." This dynamic has only been accentuated over time.

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Furthermore, Rodney implies that internationalism on a class basis lay in the historical development of capitalism and solidarity as a crucial "political" question. "European workers have paid a great price for the few material benefits which accrued to them as crumbs from the colonial table," he writes. "The capitalists misinformed and mis-educated workers in the metropolises to the point where

they became allies in colonial exploitation. In accepting to be led like sheep, European workers were perpetuating their own enslavement to the capitalists.”

Rodney’s characterisation of European workers “led like sheep” may be too simplistic a description of workers’ understanding of capitalism. But Rodney is correct in stressing that racist ideas undermined their own liberation. The “crumbs” Rodney describes are the products of divisions sown by ruling class ideology, and not of insurmountable material barriers. Actually realising this (future) possibility - that of an international movement of workers of Africa and the West - has much to be gained from Rodney’s invaluable research and analysis.

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