

A REBEL'S GUIDE TO



WALTER RODNEY

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A Rebel's Guide to Walter Rodney
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Introduction – Walter Rodney?

Walter Rodney was almost the same age as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King when the ruling class murdered him on June 13th 1980. This speaks to the relentless battle he waged against the horrors of capitalism in his mere 38 years of existence. He should be revered as one of the great radical black leaders of the last century. Rodney is best known for his famous book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (HEUA), which he wrote in Tanzania. Yet, his incredible journey and contributions to the struggle of the oppressed are unknown or remembered in pieces. Some remember him as an influential Black Power advocate in Jamaica. Few know about the time he spent in Africa. Fewer remember the socialist struggle he led before his death in Guyana.

We aim, through this book, to introduce Rodney's life, activism and political thought (1942-1980) to revive his legacy. The Rodney family and the Walter Rodney Symposium have done tremendous work in that respect. In recent years, they have republished Rodney's *Grounding with My Brothers*, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* and released his manuscript on the Russian Revolution. Yet, our work is crucial given that most biographies on Rodney are out of print. So readers unable to access academic libraries cannot obtain Rupert Lewis's main biography and discover the details of Rodney's life. We hope our short book will encourage young black people to read and write about Rodney and fight for what he stood for.

Scholars have attached various labels to Rodney's ideas and political identity. They have described them as Pan-Africanist, Black Nationalist or even anti-imperialist. Meanwhile, his most ardent supporters identify as Rodneyites. Perhaps there's some truth to all these descriptions. But the mature Rodney aspired above all to be a Marxist. We stress this point, in particular, against those who anchor Rodney in the "Black Radical"¹ tradition. The advocates of that tradition misconstrue Marxism as European in its outlook, and therefore incompatible with black liberation – Rodney never believed that. They suppose black revolutionaries must outgrow Marxism to grasp the plight of black people against imperialism.² Rodney's journey demonstrates the opposite. We contend the more Rodney developed

¹ See Manning Marable, 2011, "Marxism, Memory, and the Black Radical Tradition: Introduction to Volume 13", *Souls*, vol.13, no.1, pp1-2.

² Cedric Robinson supposes that for CLR James, WEB Dubois and Richard Wright. See Cedric. J, 2000, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, (The University of North Carolina Press), pp1-319.

his ideas, the greater he relied on Marxism to understand racism and organise black liberation.

Yet Rodney's Marxist writing, speeches and praxis extend beyond black liberation to outline key lessons for revolutionaries today. They teach us about the role of the working class as the gravedigger of capitalism. They also reflect on the debate of socialism from above versus from below, and the role of radical intellectuals. Finally, they explain the Marxist view on race and class. Rodney does not have the final word on all of these topics. He died before he reached his full potential. But Rodney's left behind a monumental body of work that strengthens our struggle against capitalism.

Chapter 1: The Early Years

On 23rd March 1942, thousands of miles from the battlefields of the Second World War, Pauline Rodney gave birth to her second son Walter in Georgetown, British Guyana. The War (1939-1945), which ravaged Europe and weakened the British Empire, gave the colonised peoples of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean hope of winning their freedom. They organised mass movements against their colonial rulers through clubs, associations and political parties. In British Guyana, Pauline and her husband Edward joined the nationalist movement in the 1950s, known as the People Progressive Party (PPP). She worked as a housewife and he was an independent tailor who, in difficult times, sought work in large establishments. Perhaps they were attracted to PPP's anti-capitalist rhetoric that promised a new society, where Guyanese workers would be wealthier and free. The Rodney's sent their elder children to distribute the PPP manifesto around the neighbourhood. Walter Rodney learnt at 11 that those who owned the wealthy houses often despised of the PPP. He also realised that he wasn't welcome on their yards – he once had to run from a dog that someone let loose on him. Rodney would remember these leafleting sessions as his introduction to the class struggle.³

Reminiscing upon his childhood in 1975, Rodney said he grew into Marxism with ease “because the PPP was the only mass party (...) and its leadership explicitly, “said we are socialist””.⁴ He further praised the PPP for uniting Guyanese of African and Indian descent against the British. Such racial alliances were rare given the British had historically divided both

³ Rodney, Walter, 1990, *The Making of an African Intellectual* (Africa World Press, Inc.) pp6-7.

⁴ Rodney, 1990, p9.

communities to better rule. Rodney's nostalgic recollection of the PPP echoed the overwhelming support Guyanese people gave the party in the 1950s. In 1953, The PPP won 75 per cent of House Assembly elections and its leader the Pro-Soviet Indian dentist, Cheddi Jagan, became Prime Minister. But the PPP's rule only lasted 133 days, as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union interfered in Guyanese Politics. Under pressure from the USA, Britain sent troops to its colony to remove the PPP and stop the spread of communism.

Despite its short rule, the PPP managed to increase the number of scholarship available to young people. It wanted to prepare Guyana for independence by broadening the number of educated Guyanese. Rodney, who excelled at school, belonged to the only generation that benefited from the PPP's reform – he earned a scholarship to attend the most prestigious high school in the country. Most of his five siblings were not offered the same opportunities and dropped out of school when their parents could no longer afford tuition fees. In 1960, Rodney won another scholarship to study history at the University of West Indies (UWI).⁵

Rodney attended the UWI in the years leading to Jamaican independence from Britain in 1962. He witnessed the University embark on what he called a “nationalist pilgrimage”, which broke ties with its colonial past. Social science students and academics refused to be taught European history. Determined to discover their Caribbean identity, they instated Eric Williams' book *Capitalism and Slavery* and CLR James' *Black Jacobins* as core curriculum readings. Few discussed these writings as Marxist literature – instead, they served to awaken nationalist consciousness. Young West Indians like Rodney felt emotional when reading these books. Williams' writing revealed to them how the enslavement of their ancestors set in motion Western industrial development, while James' story of the Haitian revolution gave them hope. They learnt that Black people could resist their masters and win. These books encouraged Rodney to write an article on the cruelty of slavery entitled the *Negro Slave* and spent time in the campus library reading on pre-colonial African history.⁶

Rodney's professors and peers adored him. He was a smart and friendly student. He captained the UWI debating team in his first year and made his reputation as a sharp mind and bold speaker. Rodney carried his speaking

⁵ Lewis, Rupert, 1998, *Walter Rodney's Intellectual and Political Thought*. (Press University of the West Indies), pp2-6.

⁶ Rodney, 1990, pp12-15.

ability into student campaigns for a federation of West Indian Nations. But, Rodney's enthusiasm for the nationalist pilgrimage faded. Even his most progressive nationalist teachers were complete philistines when it came to questions of class and socialism. The students were no better. Rodney lost his second presidential elections to the West Indian Students' Union to a conservative candidate. Voters accused him of being a dictator because he had travelled to Cuba in 1960. That criticism, however, did not discourage Rodney's fascination with Cuba. He had travelled to the island a year after the victorious revolution, in which Fidel Castro and Che Guevara led a guerrilla war against the pro-American dictatorship. Fifteen years later, Rodney still remembered the pride and sense of freedom that the revolution gave the Cuban people. "The Cubans", he said, "were running and jumping, really living the revolution in a way that was completely outside of anything that one could read anywhere."⁷

His journey to Moscow in his senior year also made a good impression on him. For the first time, he saw workers and peasants partaking in activities, such as aeroplane travel or ballet recitals that were reserved for the elite in Western countries. Rodney returned from his travel with literature. He took a keen interest in Lenin and even wrote a paper on his leadership in the Russian revolution of October 1917. Lenin's life experience showed Rodney that it was possible to be both a revolutionary organiser and an intellectual, unlike what his professor had told him.⁸ He now aspired to dedicate his radical intellect to strengthen the movements of the oppressed in the Third world. Rodney, however, would take his first major steps to become a Marxist thinker not in Jamaica but in London, where he moved to pursue his PhD in 1963.

Chapter 2 Rodney at SOAS and the influence of CLR James (1963 - 1966)

Rodney faced racism when he arrived in London to pursue his doctorate in African history at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in 1963. He had achieved a first-class degree at UWI but SOAS almost forced him to take admission exams. If Rodney were a white English man, he wouldn't have had to justify himself. But he had come from the colonies and therefore British society saw him as inferior. Yet he felt privileged compared

⁷ Rodney, 1990, p17.

⁸ Rodney, 1990, pp17-18.

to his friends and his older brother who had migrated to England to seek work – they faced the brunt of job and housing discrimination. The resistance of British black people to racism fascinated Rodney. He spent much of his free time speaking at Hyde Park where West-Indians gathered to discuss politics. He talked about racism, Caribbean politics, Apartheid and Zimbabwean independence. Rodney was happy to reunite with his Girlfriend Patricia who had left Guyana to work as a nurse. They had started dating in the summer before Rodney went to University in Jamaica, and maintained a long-distance relationship until he arrived in London. Having at last reunited, the couple lived together and later married in 1965.⁹

In England, Rodney aimed to deepen his engagement with Marxism to relate to the Black working-class. SOAS, however, proved unable to help him with such a task. “There was nobody”, he lamented, “who could be remotely termed a Marxist.”¹⁰ Rodney thought SOAS, which was founded in 1916 to train British colonial administrators, now educated Africans to serve the interests of Europe. He despised his curriculum and his pretentious professors entrenched in Bourgeois ideology. One of his lecturers, the renowned historian John D. Fage, foolishly argued the slave trade benefited West-African development, and did no harm to the region’s demographics and economy.¹¹ Rodney challenged this defence of the slave trade in his thesis *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast 1545-1800*. Although he thought his dissertation showed no strong Marxist scholarship, it was the work of a people’s historian. Rodney portrayed pre-colonial West Africa as innovative and culturally refined, countered the narrative of Western scholars that depicted it as primitive.¹² He exposed how European powers disrupted the lives African commoners and polities through the slave trade. Rodney sought to develop this theme in his later work “to upset (...) the deans of African history in London”¹³, as he once stated.

The British revolutionary left made a terrible impression on Rodney. He ridiculed the sectarianism of the Communist Party and Trotskyist groups. They seemed more interested in debating amongst themselves than organising workers and defending migrants. He found them old, inarticulate and unprepared. Rodney, moreover, accused the British left of neglecting the

⁹ Lewis, 1998, pp.31-35.

¹⁰ Rodney, 1990, p27.

¹¹ Fage, J.D, 1969 “Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Context of West African History” *The Journal of African History*, Vol.10, No.3, pp. 393-404

¹² See Rodney, Walter, 1970, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast 1545 to 1800*, (Oxford University Press.) pp1-297.

¹³ Lewis, 1998, p.36.

fight against racism. He resented the paternalism, the silent and open racism he encountered from some of them.¹⁴ Rodney was not the first Black activist to be frustrated with the British Left. Before him, Claudia Jones, the founder of Notting Hill Carnival and Communist Party member, had criticised her party for marginalising anti-racism in the 1950s.¹⁵ But Rodney found solace in a Marxist study group taught by CLR James and his wife Selma. From 1963 to 1966, he and a few radical West Indian students visited James' home in North West-London on Friday evenings.

Rodney saw in CLR James qualities that he admired. James never went to university, yet he was a brilliant Trinidadian Marxist scholar, a prolific writer and a powerful orator. As a Black Bolshevik, he placed the liberation of Africans and colonised peoples at the core of his politics. In his Trotskyist days, James led campaigns against Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia before writing his Marxist history of the Haitian revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, in 1938. Although James had long broken with Trotskyism when Rodney met him in the 1960s, he was still in a class of his own. He recently returned from Trinidad and Tobago after opposing the despotism of his friend, Prime Minister Eric Williams, by resigning as editor of his party's newspaper.¹⁶ James taught Rodney on Marx's theory of historical change and the Russian revolution. They read classics such as, Marx's *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, and Lenin's *What Is to Be Done*.

From listening to James, Rodney learnt about the revolutionary potential of the working-class through its past and present militancy in Europe and abroad. He discovered that exploitation gave workers immense power, as the capitalist relied on their labour-power to make profits – if the workers refused to work, they could defeat capitalism. Rodney also wrote a paper on Marxism and democracy to show what the workers must do to the state in a revolution. Years later, he wrote on the Russian Revolution: “The workers could not simply take over a bourgeois parliament and consider the revolution achieved; (...) the Bourgeois state had to be destroyed and replaced by institutions which sprang from the working masses.”¹⁷ That's how well he understood the Lenin's *State and Revolution*.

¹⁴ Rodney, 1990, p31-32.

¹⁵ Brown, Geoff, 2019, “Tackling racism: the Communist Party's mixed record”, *International Socialism* 163 (summer), <https://isj.org.uk/tackling-racism-the-communist-party/>

¹⁶ Boukari-Yabara, Amzat, 2010, *Walter Rodney (1942-1980): Itinéraire et Mémoire d'un Intellectuel Africain*, PhD thesis, (Centre d'Études Africaines CEAF, EHESS) pp389-402.

¹⁷ Rodney, Walter, 2018, *The Russian Revolution: A View From The Third World* (Verso), pp108.

Although a student of James, Rodney's Marxism was influenced by Third World intellectuals, namely Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara and Amilcar Cabral. They made Rodney appreciate armed struggle as essential for the struggle against imperialism in the Global South. He believed in the redemptive qualities of revolutionary violence that Fanon discussed in *Wretched of Earth*. This violence freed the colonised from their inferiority complex and transformed them into a proud independent people. It was the highest form of politics as it forced revolutionaries to educate and mobilise the masses.¹⁸ In this respect, Rodney admired the guerrilla liberation movements against Portuguese colonialism. He felt attached to them, as he had witnessed Salazar's horrid fascism when conducting his PhD research in Lisbon. Amilcar Cabral, who directed the guerrilla war against Portugal in Guinea-Bissau with incredible success, was the revolutionary he aspired to be. Rodney took from him the idea that revolutionary intellectuals must understand the historical reality they seek to transform. They must learn from the people and grasp their needs to better influence the struggle.¹⁹

On the 5th July 1966, the day Patricia gave birth to his son Shaka, Rodney earned his PhD in African history. He then moved with his family to Tanzania for the first of two extended visits to teach history for one year and meet the Mozambican and Angolan freedom fighters stationed there. But Rodney forged his reputation as a revolutionary when he relocated to Jamaica to lecture at the UWI in January 1968.

Chapter 3 Fighting for Black Power in Jamaica (1968)

On the morning of 16th October 1968, 900 students gathered at the UWI campus and began marching to Kingston. They were angered by the Jamaican government's decision to expel their beloved professor Walter Rodney from the island. They, however, did not get far before the police tear-gassed and beat them into retreat. But the students returned more determined in the afternoon. Now they had thousands of Rastafarians, working-class and unemployed youths in their ranks. When they invaded Kingston, they did

¹⁸ See Fanon, Frantz, 1967, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (Harmondsworth) pp35-95. For Rodney's views on armed struggle see Rodney, 1990, pp51-52.

¹⁹ Manji, Firoze, and Bill Fletcher, 2013, *Claim No Easy Victories: the Legacy of Amilcar Cabral*. (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa), pp297-315.

what the youth of spring 1968 had done in Paris, Prague and the black neighbourhoods of America. In Jamaica, they set fire to 15 buses and looted American and Canadian companies, chanting “Black Power” until dawn.

Perhaps Rodney’s Black Power advocacy had inspired Jamaica’s youth. However, the significance of the Rodney riots went beyond demands for his reinstatement. It lay in the poverty and the political exclusion of Jamaicans and the rise of black consciousness among the youth. The young protesters, like most Jamaicans, descended from the thousands of African slaves that British colonialism bought to be exploited on the sugar cane estates of Jamaica for over two centuries. Their ancestors sometimes resisted slavery, but never managed to take control of the island’s wealth from their masters. In the century after emancipation in 1838, many of them turned wage-labourers on the declining British sugar estates, while some became poor peasants. The luckier ones later found work on the docks and the western-owned banana and bauxite industries of the 20th century. The workers, however, unleashed a wave of strikes and protests against colonialism in response to the suffering caused by the Great Depression of the 1930s. But, the great labour unrest of the 1930s, that also swept the entire British West Indies, sadly ended in their defeat.

The unrest nevertheless forced Britain to open its administration to the infinitesimal educated Jamaicans, which inherited state-power after independence in 1962. The new rulers prospered under the Jamaican Labour Party’s (JLP) government through the substantial foreign investment they received from Western companies. They were white, brown, Lebanese and Chinese but had very few blacks among their ranks – a disgraceful sight given that 90 per cent of residents descended from Africans slaves. Thus, freedom from Britain meant nothing for the vast majority of Jamaicans. Rural poverty and unemployment on the decaying estates forced many to migrate to Kingston and often join ranks with 150 000 slum dwellers.²⁰

In the 1950s and 1960s, Black Nationalism expressed the anger of poor black youths’ at the political elite and multinationals. After all, the radical labour movement of the 1930s had been defeated; the JLP and its rival the People National Congress (PNC) had co-opted trade unions and turned them into electoral machines. The absence of organisational models may well explain the adventurism that characterised Jamaica’s Black Nationalist

²⁰ Payne, Anthony, 1983, “The Rodney Riots In Jamaica: The background and significance of the events of October 1968”, *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, p60.

movements. In 1960, for instance, the Jamaican authorities and the CIA uncovered the plot of an Afrocentric evangelical sect led Rev Henri Claudius to overthrow the Jamaican Government. Three years after the Henri Rebellion, the state attacked a much larger black Christian movement: the Rastafarians.

In the 1960s, thousands of youths converted to Rastafarianism and adopted a lifestyle that ranged from ganja smoking and dreadlock growing to squatting and small-scale farming. But squatting made them victims of evictions and police brutality. In 1963, six Rastafarians attacked a petrol station on the Coral Gardens property that resulted in the killing of nine people, including two policemen. The assault was an act of revenge against landlords and the government's attempts to evict squatters to repurpose the land for tourism. The police and the army retaliated by arresting 150 innocent Rastafarians. Rastafarianism posed a serious threat to the ruling class as it questioned its multiracial composition and their lavish western lifestyles.

The elite sometimes resorted to peaceful means when trying to accommodate the agitation around Black consciousness. In 1966, it invited Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, whom the Rastafari worshipped as their messiah. Ethiopia held a special place in the hearts of Rastafarians because it was never colonized. So when news of the emperor visit spread across the island, crowds rushed to greet Selassie on the tarmac breaking all security barriers. Some believe the unofficial parades celebrating Selassie arrival were even bigger than those on Independence Day. Whether this was true or not, the visit increased the legitimacy and following of the Rastafari. The ruling class, however, realised that Black Nationalism proved to difficult to control. The growing influence of the American Black Power movement in Jamaica added to their panic.²¹

In 1968, the JLP banned all Black Power literature from the USA fearing the extent to which the ideas of the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X inspired Jamaican students and academics. It resented the formation of a militant alliance between radical black intellectuals and the masses. That year, the Jamaican ruling party also monitored the activities of a 26-year-old lecturer named Walter Rodney who had arrived on the island in January. What did Rodney do to get expelled from the island in October?

²¹ For context on the Rodney Riots, see Payne, 1983, pp.158-174 or Lewis, Rupert, 1998b, "Walter Rodney: 1968 Revisited", *Press University of the West Indies*, pp 12-22.

How did he win the hearts and minds of the masses during his short stay on the island?

Chapter 4: Grounding with my Brothers (1968)

Eight months prior to his banning from Jamaica, Rodney was appointed lecturer in African history at the UWI. His students admired his kindness and modesty. Rodney was different from the academics that returned from London with dandy shirts and a forged British accent. Rodney wore dashikis, an Afro haircut and spoke English with a Guyanese twang, yet he had also earned a PhD. Unlike his ivory-tower colleagues, Rodney refused to live on the UWI campus and settled in West Kingston to be closer to the oppressed. He believed the role of the radical intellectual was to help the masses win their struggles, and he intended to use his knowledge for that purpose.

People respected Rodney for his public lectures on Black Power at the Students' Union. He was a talented speaker who attracted dozens of listeners on campus. After one of his speeches, Rodney made friends with three Rastafarians who then connected him to grassroots activist circles and the masses. One of them, Robin Small, had reneged his middle-class upbringing to live among the poor. He invited Rodney to the groundings – the informal religious gathering that Rastafarians organised in the shantytowns of Kingston. Rodney enjoyed listening to the activists he met at those meetings. Among them, the Rev Claudius Henry left a big impression on him. The reverend had finished serving a six-year prison sentence for conspiring to overthrow the government. Rodney visited Henry's Pan-African church and was amazed by what he saw. He wrote:

“In Kemp's Hill, in the middle of a most depressed area, which is the Prime Minister's constituency, Rev Henry has gathered together a number of black brothers and sisters, and they have turned themselves into an independent black economic community. In less than a year they built themselves an attractive church and several dwelling houses, all of concrete for they make the concrete blocks.”²²

This passage highlighted Rodney's unshaken support for the attempts of ordinary working people to manage their own affairs when abandoned by the state. Yet, he thought that the black masses could achieve more than build

²² Rodney quoted in Lewis, 1998b, p25.

a community – they could rule the island. He was ready to speak to them about Black Power and its relevance to Jamaica and the Caribbean.

According to Rodney's friend Robert Hill, leaflets were never distributed to promote the groundings. Yet two to three hundred people came to hear Rodney speak on African history and Jamaican politics around a campfire on Sunday mornings.²³ The Labour Party, which governed the island, saw Rodney as the Guyanese troublemaker and spied on him. Rodney did not join nor build any organisation. He was just an intellectual interacting with the masses, yet the Jamaican ruling class felt threatened by his message on Black Power. Rodney spoke of Black Power as ideology and movement against the oppression of black people by whites under capitalism. He defined Black Power in the West Indies as: "(1) The break with imperialism, which is historically white racist; (2) the assumption of power by the black masses in the islands; (3) the cultural reconstruction of society in the image of blacks."²⁴ Although Rodney viewed Black Power as a universal call for self-determination, he thought its relevance to West Indies differed from that in America. In the United States, the program of most black leaders suited the interest of an African American racial minority that faced job and housing discrimination and police brutality from white officers. The principal theoretician of Black Power, Stokely Carmichael, for instance, argued for blacks to take political and economic control of their communities away from the police and the state.²⁵

Unlike in America, African descendants were the majority in most of the ex-British West Indies and suffered oppression from blacks and other non-whites peoples. So Rodney theorised Black Power in more a radical way than Carmichael, to challenge the domination of what he called the "white imperialist system"²⁶. This system referred to the collusion between the local elite and the Western multinational companies that exploited workers and robbed the Caribbean of its raw materials. Rodney also anchored his Black Power in internationalism by linking the struggles of Jamaicans to liberation movements in the Global South fighting colonialism and imperialism. Moreover, he argued that West-Indian Black Power concerned Indians and Africans alike. In his homeland, Guyanese Indians outnumbered Africans

²³ Robert Hill in Chung Clairmont (ed.), 2012, *Walter A. Rodney: A Promise of Revolution*, (Monthly Review Press), pp65-66.

²⁴ Rodney, Walter, 1969, *The Groundings with my Brothers*, (Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications), p38.

²⁵ Note that Stokely views on Black Power radicalised after 1969. Besides, co-founder of the Black Panthers, Huey Newton argued for a socialist revolution in America.

²⁶ Rodney, Walter, 1969, pp.41

and they made half of Trinidad and Tobago's demographic. Both peoples, he maintained, shared a similar historical and contemporary experience. The British Empire had bought Africans as slaves, and then shipped Indians as indentured labour; now both communities endured poverty and saw power denied to them.²⁷

In Jamaica, Rodney criticised the ruling class for flaunting the myth of a harmonious multiracial Jamaican society. He despised its national motto, "Out of Many, One People"²⁸, for obscuring that a small multi-racial elite ruled over an African majority. For Rodney, the elite feared above all the prospect of Jamaicans organising politically around their African identity. Therefore, many of his speeches emphasised the need for blacks to reconnect with their African heritage. Rodney aspired to dismantle the inferiority complex that slavery, colonialism and racism instilled among blacks by representing Africa as primitive and uncivilised. "We are the only group in the world who deny ourselves preferring to be known as Negros. (...) To know ourselves we must learn about African history"²⁹, he told Black students in San Francisco. Rodney had a similar message for his Jamaican audience. At the groundings, he spoke at length on the great empires of Ethiopia, Kush and Benin. The empirical evidence he presented in his lectures strengthened the religious claims that Rastafarians held on the grandeur of ancient African civilisations. The Rastafarians nicknamed him the African doctor because of his knowledge of African history.

Although Rodney argued that history was a crucial weapon for mobilising black people, he thought its importance was secondary to the tactics and strategy of revolution. What was the correct revolutionary strategy for Jamaica? Rodney grappled with this question that weighed so heavily on his mind. He knew that Che Guevara's teaching on guerrilla warfare was irrelevant in Jamaica as the situation was not explosive. Instead he took from Che's life experience the need to agitate for more concrete action. "All that matters", he wrote, "is the question of action: determined, informed and scientific action against imperialism and its cohorts."³⁰ Where did theory fit in this picture? Rodney seldom mentioned his affinity with Marxism in his speeches. Perhaps, he did not want to alienate the

²⁷ See Rodney, 1969, pp25-27 and pp38-41.

²⁸ See Rodney, 1969, pp.75

²⁹ Dwayne Omowale (2016) Walter Rodney-African Identity (online video) available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EswrOoBcjk> (assessed August 2020).

³⁰Lewis, 1998a, p111.

Rastafarians around him who despised socialism. Rodney, however, did celebrate the emergence of a rank-and-file workers movement that staged strikes without the support of the state co-opted unions. Yet the workers figured as only one of the revolutionary classes that he identified. He did not view their struggles against capital in Jamaica as central for revolution. Instead he placed most of his revolutionary faith in the unemployed black youth.

At the Montreal's Black Writers Conference of October 1968, Rodney spoke with passion on the Jamaica's youths growing readiness to fight: "Throughout the country, black youth are becoming aware of the possibilities of unleashing armed struggle in their own interest. For those have eyes to see, there is already evidence of the beginning of resistance to the violence of our oppressors."³¹ It's no wonder that the Jamaican government barred Rodney from entering Jamaica upon his return from the conference. Unfortunately, the Rodney Riots that ensued failed to reinstate him and to produce a mass movement. Caribbean Black Power instead peaked in 1970 with the Trinidadian revolution that almost overthrew President Eric Williams. Although they were defeated, the Trinidadian workers proved to be the locus of power – their strikes paralysed the economy and fuelled the anti-government protest. Rodney did not foresee this working-class potential when discussing Black Power in the Caribbean. Meanwhile, Jamaican Black Nationalism capitulated to the era of party rivalry between the JLP and the People National Congress, described as "Politricks" or "Gunman Politics."³² Both parties financed gangs to suppress rival supporters to win swing constituencies. The turf wars divided and absorbed the once radical ghetto youths. Contrary to what Rodney believed at the time, the youths did not have the coherence and the power to lead the struggle.

Despite the failure of Black Power, Rodney's activism in Jamaica is still remembered today in reggae songs and activist circles. At only 26 years of age, Rodney had galvanised the oppressed masses and frightened the political establishment. News of his exploits in Jamaica reached two Guyanese activists, Jessica and Eric Huntley, who owned a black bookshop in London. In 1969, they met Rodney and published his speeches on Black Power under the title: *The Groundings With My Brothers*. In his pamphlet, Rodney asserted that the Jamaican government was wrong to believe that his

³¹ Rodney, 1969, pp23-24.

³² Lewis, 1998b, p38.

expulsion from the island would stifle the masses. “This act”, he concluded, “will not delay its day of Judgment.”³³ His faith in the self-activity of masses would follow him everywhere.

Chapter 5: Tanzania, the Mecca of African Liberation (1969-1974)

Karim Hirji, a Tanzanian student, was in a good mood when he went to bed on the 10th of July 1969. That evening he heard the most impressive lecture of his life at the University of Dar es Salaam. The lecture was on the Cuban Revolution and its relevance to Africa. Back in his dorm, he praised the speaker in his diary: “one could almost feel the strong conviction and deep emotions from which he spoke”³⁴. The man he admired and later befriended was Walter Rodney.

After leaving Jamaica, Rodney settled with his family in Tanzania to teach history and political science at the University of Dar Es Salaam from 1969 to 1974. He reconnected with the socialist students he had met during his first stay in 1967. In those days, Rodney helped them establish the University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF). He ran their Marxist workshops and attended their anti-imperialist protests and talks. His connections bought the likes of CLR James, Stokely Carmichael and Cheddi Jagan to speak on USARF platforms. Upon his return in 1969, Rodney was pleased to see that the USARF had gained new members. Comrade Hirji was one of them. He got Rodney to write the first article for the group’s magazine *Cheche* on African labour (the name *Cheche* referred to Lenin’s newspaper *Iskra*). Rodney thus continued agitating for socialism on campus as he had done in Jamaica. But the political climate now favoured him, as Tanzania was the mecca of African liberation.³⁵

Tanzania offered hope to Rodney and many radical black intellectuals. They felt the African Diaspora’s plight for freedom and equality relied on the success of anti-imperialist movements in Africa. Tanzania’s first president Julius Nyerere his Party, the Tanganyika African Nation Union (TANU) opposed imperialism as few independent African states did. Nyerere gave diplomatic and material support to every national liberation movement in southern Africa. He opened offices for the Mozambican

³³ Rodney, 1969, pp74.

³⁴ Hirji, Karim, 2017, *The Enduring Relevance of Walter Rodney's How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Mkuki Na Nyota), <https://rodneyhirji.pressbooks.com/chapter/chapter-1/>

³⁵ Hirji, Karim, 2010, *Cheche: Reminiscences of a Radical Magazine*. (African Books Collective), p29.

liberation front (FRELIMO) and built military bases for them. He established training camps for the paramilitary wing of Mandela's African National Congress to help it fight Apartheid in South Africa. Living in Tanzania enabled Rodney to deepen his understanding of guerrilla warfare and international solidarity. FRELIMO fighters taught him how to shoot a rifle when he toured their camps. He also met with delegations from Vietnam and organised solidarity protests with the Vietnamese on campus.

When Rodney first visited Tanzania in 1967, he witnessed Nyerere publish his program for socialism and self-reliance in the Arusha Declaration. The president had thus turned his African socialist philosophy known as Ujaama – familyhood – into a policy of nationalisation of foreign companies and land reform. He aspired to increase food production through the creation of collective farming Ujaama villages. Africans were no longer to rely on volatile cash crops and aid from advanced capitalist nations to make a living. Nyerere was confident that his plan suited the interest of the peasant majority. But he had yet to convince the minuscule educated elite, who was students and state officials, to help the peasants. Back in 1964, some elitist students had shown Nyerere their disdain for work in the countryside when they protested against compulsory national service. Since then, Nyerere vowed to turn the university into a battleground for his progressive ideas.³⁶

By 1970, Rodney stood at the heart of the debates concerning African underdevelopment that occurred almost every night at the University. In the packed auditorium, Rodney debated a TANU Cabinet Minister on Tanzania's economic direction. He also debated the renowned Kenyan political science professor, Ali Mazuri, on why Africa should be socialist, not capitalist. His ideas, however, did not always please Nyerere. The president once replied with anger to an article Rodney published in TANU's newspaper. Rodney had argued that African leaders who served western capitalism deserved to be overthrown by the people. Nyerere disagreed and accused him of preaching violence to young people. The regime set limits on how left students and academics could be. A few months later, it banned the USARF for promoting "foreign ideology"³⁷.

³⁶ See Mattavous, Viola, 1985, "Walter Rodney and Africa", *Journal of Black Studies*, pp 115-130. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784257> and Boukari-Yabara, Amzat, 2010, *Walter Rodney (1942-1980): Itinéraire et Mémoire d'un Intellectuel Africain*, PhD thesis, (Centre d'Études Africaines CEAF, EHESS) pp351-362.

³⁷ Hirji, Karim, 2010,p95.

The ban did not discourage Rodney from sharing his radical Marxist ideas with students. He taught a graduate course on the Russian revolution to show his African students that they could draw lessons in struggle from October 1917. He made parallels between Nyerere's Tanzania and Tsarist Russia, which both had a large peasantry, a small working-class and suffered at the hands of imperialist powers.

Rodney praised the Russian Revolution as the first break with capitalism, transforming the once agrarian Soviet Union into an industrial power in its Aftermath.

Bourgeois historians, he argued, discredit October 1917 because it represents the triumph of organised workers allied with peasants over their class.³⁸

Rodney had begun a monograph on the Russian revolution in 1971, but he never finished it because he had more urgent matters at hand. He wanted to use Marxist theory to address the issue of African underdevelopment.

Chapter 6: How Europe Underdeveloped Africa

Rodney's involvement in debates concerning African underdevelopment in Tanzania inspired him to write his most influential book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. He was concerned that most African nations had not broken ties with old colonial powers in the decade after colonialism. They had achieved political independence but their economies remained in the hands of European and American companies. They remained poor and reliant on foreign aid because the Western ruling class stole their natural wealth (land, oil etc.) for its benefit with help from the African leaders who served them. Yet, many Africans intellectuals still believed that trade deals, loans and investment from advanced capitalist countries would benefit African development. Rodney sought to convince them of the contrary.

Published in 1972, his book revealed that European intervention in Africa, through the slave trade and colonialism, stifled African development. It told how the European ruling class robbed Africa of its wealth, while Africa's wealth contributed to its prosperity and Europe's industrial growth. Rodney examined Africa's relationship with Europe from 1500 to 1960 to elucidate the present. He opened the preface with his message for the future: "African development is only possible on the basis of radical break with the

³⁸ Rodney, 2018, p76.

international capitalist system”³⁹, which had underdeveloped Africa for centuries.

Rodney’s skilful use of Marx’s historical method in his book uprooted Africa from the colonial myths surrounding its past. In chapter one, Rodney dismantled the racist idea that Africa stood outside progress by defining development as universal and multifaceted process. As Marx and Engels did before him, he understood development from how humans cooperate to make a better living out of nature. He explained that when people found better ways to produce wealth by working together, they developed new forms of cooperation and ideas; and changed their society.⁴⁰ So Rodney dedicated the second chapter to portraying Africa’s development before Europeans arrived in the 1500s. Far from being outside of progress, Africa displayed formidable advances in agriculture, science and art. Most societies were small classless ones with low levels of production, where people had equal access to land and evenly shared resources. Africa, however, developed more hierarchical entities that resembled Europe’s feudal states in places like Ethiopia, Egypt and Zimbabwe. In these unequal societies, a ruling class owned the land and appropriated the surplus created by the exploited peasants. As Africa and all societies developed, Rodney argued, Underdevelopment was never the absence of development. It was not inherent to Africa and its people, but the historical consequence of capitalist expansion and imperialism.⁴¹

By the 16th century, Europe developed at a faster pace than Africa and the rest of the world, transitioning from feudalism to capitalism. Rodney argued European powers demonstrated their superiority in maritime and armaments technology. They opened West Africa for trade with their ships and cannons, and transformed it into a supplier of slaves for their plantations in America and the Caribbean. What was the consequence of the transatlantic slave trade for African underdevelopment? In the third and fourth chapter, Rodney answered this question by engaging in the debate concerning the number of African captives. He opposed Philip Curtin’s tally that counted only 10 million enslaved from 1500 to 1870. “Because it is a low figure it is already being used by European scholars who are apologists for the capitalist

³⁹ Rodney, Walter, 2012, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.(CODESRIA & Pambazuka Press), pxi.

⁴⁰ Note: Rodney did not see development as a linear process. Although it was a general trend, it was uneven across continents and regions. As sometimes, the people who defended old forms of cooperation and ideas stopped those attempting to modernise production, delaying societal change for years to come. See Rodney, 2012, p7-10. For Marx’s historical materialist method, see Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels, 1970, *The German Ideology*. (Lawrence & Wishart) pp42-60.

⁴¹ Rodney, 2012, pp.3-70.

system and its long record of brutality”⁴². Rodney then explained that Curtin’s toll failed to measure the whole tragedy because it only relied on records of slaves’ arrivals in America. The number of victims went far beyond 10 million, as some captives were smuggled and millions more never left Africa. They died in the wars fought over slaves while more captives perished during the long journeys from the interior to the coast.

After he established the horrific magnitude of the slave trade, Rodney explained how it underdeveloped Africa. He showed that the trade stunted Africa’s demographic growth. As European powers kidnapped able young men and women, Africa lost those in childbearing age who performed the most arduous task on the land. With fewer people at hand, many African societies struggled to harness nature and develop. Moreover, Rodney argued that Europe’s demand for slaves made slave raiding and wars commonplace in West Africa. Societies that had hitherto coexisted in peace now turned on each other to acquire more slaves. Violence instilled fear and insecurity among Africans; it disrupted the organisation of agriculture, mining and commerce that they had established over centuries. It destroyed crops and artisanal trade turning farmers into soldiers, and soldiers into slaves. This disruption even impeded the development of African regions that were not involved in the slave trade.

While the slave trade stalled and reversed African development, it contributed to Europe’s capitalist development. Rodney demonstrated that the slave trade generated enormous profits for Portuguese, British and French empires making the fortunes of countless bourgeois merchant and planters. Its wealth and magnitude gave rise to the infamous ports of Bristol, Liverpool, Nantes and Bordeaux. He asserted that the profits and goods accrued from the exploitation of African slaves in the New World fuelled Britain’s industrial revolution. A century ago, Karl Marx made the same point as him when he wrote, “without slavery there would be no cotton, without cotton there would be no modern industry.”⁴³ At the end of chapter four, Rodney explained why colonialism emerged out of the imperialist stage of capitalism in the late 19th century. Rivalries between European capitalist firms assumed the form of a competition between nation-states for control over the world’s markets, natural resources and trade routes. Africa, which had been weakened from centuries of slave trading, fell victim to Europe’s

⁴² Rodney, 2012, pp.96

⁴³ Marx, Karl, 1846, Letter from Marx to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov (1846), <http://hiaw.org/defcon6/works/1846/>

violent colonial conquest. European ruling classes justified this conquest with racist ideology, as they claimed to civilise and convert savages people to Christianity. Thus, by 1900, they had divided the entire African continent into colonies.⁴⁴

In the fifth chapter, Rodney analysed colonialism (1885-1960) as a cruel and exploitative system, whereby the European bourgeoisie extracted wealth from African workers and peasants. He assessed the oppression and suffering of African workers at the hands of the colonial state. The state ensured that Africans often worked under forced labour, while their European counterparts could freely sell their labour. The Africans able to choose their employers received miserable wages for endless hours of work. Yet colonial rule was even worse for the African peasant. Rodney argued the colonial state confiscated their land through severe taxation, evictions and warfare. It forced some peasants to abandon food production for export crops that sold for cheap. Moreover, peasants suffered at the hands of trading companies and their middlemen who offered miserable prices. Rodney, however, did not simply illustrate the horrors of colonialism. He provided case studies on multinational companies, like Unilever, and the enormous profits they acquired from robbing Africans. Moreover, he asserted that Africa's contribution to capitalism went beyond monetary returns. Its raw materials supported Europe's advancement in electronics, metallurgy and chemistry and other industries, which stood at the centre of Europe's capitalist development in the 20th century.⁴⁵

In the final chapter, Rodney attacked the racist idea that colonialism had benefits for Africans because the colonisers built railroads, schools and hospitals. All the roads and rails, he said, went from the plantation and mines to the coast to ship raw materials to Europe, never to encourage trade between Africans. The infrastructure that colonialist built served to entrench Africa's unfavourable position in the world economy, as a precarious supplier of raw materials and a free market for European finished-products. The colonialist had no interest in providing health care and education to Africans. Rodney established the grim tally of five centuries of Portuguese colonisation: "The Portuguese had not managed to train a single African doctor in Mozambique, and the life expectancy in Eastern Angola was less than thirty years."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Rodney, 2012, pp.75-145.

⁴⁵ Rodney, 2012, pp.149-201.

⁴⁶ Rodney, 2012, p206.

Rodney's historical account received support from Tanzania's radical socialist Minister A. M. Babu who clarified Africa's present predicament in the postscript. "Foreign investment", the minister wrote, "is the cause, and not a solution, to our economic backwardness."⁴⁷ It went into projects designed to exploit African labour and raw materials for the benefit of the Western ruling class, never into health care and education. At best, foreign investments made the fortunes of the few African leaders and businessmen, who partnered with western states and multinationals. But it failed to uplift the masses from poverty. Babu and Rodney advocated for a revolutionary path to development aimed at breaking Africa's dependence on imperialist powers and empowering the workers and peasants. What would that path look like? Rodney thought that Nyerere's socialism offered an answer to that question.

Chapter 7: Rodney and Ujamaa: Socialism from above or below

Rodney's friends remembered the parties that he and Patricia hosted at their house Dar-Es-Salaam. When Rodney wasn't working, there was always someone visiting the couple to discuss politics or play domino. Patricia described her husband as a good family man; he did house chores and cooked – he loved making Chinese food. Patricia gave birth to their daughters-Kanini in 1969 and Asha in 1971. Rodney enjoyed spending time and playing with his kids. When he visited Ujamaa villages near Dodoma in 1970 with the USARF and the TANU youth league, he brought his son Shaka along. Rodney lodged there for weeks and worked on installations for farming. He relished every opportunity to meet peasants and learn about Tanzanian socialism.

Rodney grew fascinated with Ujamaa. He saw it as a radical initiative to eradicate poverty in the countryside. By 1973, TANU had moved 15 per cent of the peasantry from isolated homesteads into cooperative farms, which revitalised the traditional communal ways of life.⁴⁸ These Ujamaa villages were supplied with electricity and clean water, schools and clinics to encourage peasants to produce more food for the nation. Rodney believed Ujamaa reduced Tanzania's reliance on trade the West by replacing cash crops with food farming. But he mistakenly claimed it charted a new path to socialism, which refuted the necessity of a worker's revolution. He defended

⁴⁷ Rodney, 2012, p284.

⁴⁸ Boesen, Jannik, Madesen, Birgit and Moody, Tony, 1977, *Ujamaa- Socialism from Above*, (Copenhagen: Uppsala), p15

his view against the Marxists who stated that Tanzania must experience advanced capitalism and develop a large proletariat before moving to socialism. Rodney argued the *Ujamaa* villages could form the basis of a socialist development that avoided capitalism if TANU modernised them with help from socialist nations. He hoped this route would safeguard peasants against the inequalities that colonialism produced through individual commercial farming – the rise of landlords at the expense of landless peasants. For Rodney, socialism meant preserving the *Ujamaa* villages from capitalist influence.⁴⁹

Until 1973, Rodney supported the Tanzanian state as the driver of socialism and the peasantry as its base. He discarded the central idea of Marxism that the emancipation of the working-class must be the act of the workers. In Tanzania, the working class was too small and unorganised to lead the nation out poverty. He naively expected Nyerere and TANU to deliver socialism to the peasants and workers and to share state-power with them. Failing to see the masses as capable of liberating themselves, he thus favoured socialism from above. But his enthusiasm for Tanzanian Socialism vanished the more he looked at the bureaucratic class that controlled TANU and the state. In 1978, four years after he left Tanzania, Rodney declared: “TANU has not been transformed. It remains a nationalist party under the control of the petit bourgeoisie (...) incapable of providing the basis for sustained socialist transformation.”⁵⁰

How and why did Rodney change his mind in less than five years? His Marxist USARF comrades played a key role in convincing him that TANU’s *Ujamaa* villages and nationalised factories failed to empower the peasants and workers. They thought these policies allowed the Tanzanian one-party state to exploit and oppress the masses as under colonialism.⁵¹ From late 1973, Rodney also realised this when he looked at TANU’s catastrophic plan to increase *Ujamaa* Villages to stop the food shortage that hit the countryside. TANU ordered peasants to move to areas that were unsuitable for farming. It then deployed the police when the peasants refused to relocate. That the bureaucrats never sought to persuade the peasant disheartened Rodney. He was even more appalled to learn from his discussions with peasants that they

⁴⁹ Rodney, Walter, 1972, “Tanzanian *Ujamaa* and Scientific Socialism”, *African Review*, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/>

⁵⁰ Quoted in Zeilig, Leo, 2019, Walter Rodney’s Journey to Hamburg, Review of African Political Economy blog, <http://roape.net/2019/02/14/walter-rodneys-journey-to-hamburg/>

⁵¹ For debates between Rodney and USARF students on *Ujamaa* see Hirji, Karim, 2010, p.133-55 and Issa Shivji in Chung, Clairmont (ed.), 2012, pp90-91.

controlled no aspects of production in Ujamaa villages. All that mattered for TANU was how much grain it could quickly extract from the peasants' labour. "It is always dangerous for bureaucratization to parade in the name of socialism. It happened under Stalin"⁵², warned Rodney. He feared that TANU, which had led the masses out of colonialism, now began to act like any Stalinist one-party bureaucratic state.

Rodney was also struck by TANU contempt for the workers as it refused to extend management of its nationalised factories to them. Although Tanzanian bureaucrats had replaced colonial managers, workers remained exploited on minimum wages. So he disliked that Nyerere dismissed the workers as a privileged class, accusing them of wanting to steal from the peasants when they asked for higher wages. Nyerere had forced workers to sacrifice their interest in favour of national unity. (Back in 1964 he co-opted all trade unions into the one-party state after labour leader supported an army mutiny against him.) The mistreatment of the masses led Rodney to grow suspicious of the petty-bourgeoisie class who ran TANU – the student, intellectuals and civil servants that colonialism educated. In 1975, he explained that the petty-bourgeoisie never owned anything until it seized the colonial state after independence. The state became its lever of power as it took bureaucratic ownership of the economy from the British and Asian traders. Rodney now saw the Ujamaa villages and national factories not as socialism, but as a means for TANU's petty bourgeoisie to expand the state control over production and to recruit more of its kind into lucrative bureaucratic jobs.⁵³ TANU could not be reformed from within.

How could masses free themselves from their exploitation at the hands of the state? Rodney found his solution when he looked back and rejoiced at the workers strike movement of the early 1970s. In 1975, four months after he left Tanzania, Rodney spoke to students in Chicago about the conflicts between masses and the weak Tanzania state, enthusiastically declaring that workers' struggles threatened TANU with revolution. He argued that the Tanzanian working class was small but its strategic position in the economy gave it great power. So Nyerere and TANU could not ignore the agitation of workers in the factories, the docks and in the hospitals. The state, as Rodney explained, issued a charter of workers rights in 1971 called Mwongozo to respond to workers demands for better conditions. The charter stipulated that

⁵² Rodney, Walter, 1975a, "Class Contradictions in Tanzania", in *The State in Tanzania*, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/rodney-walter/works/classcontradictions.htm>

⁵³ Rodney, 1975a.

employers couldn't be arrogant, contemptuous and oppressive, as under colonialism. But, TANU efforts to appease workers backfired, as Rodney remarked; the workers used the charter beyond their expectations to contest low wages, favouritism and sexual harassment. They printed and kept a booklet version of the charter and opened it on the appropriate page when arguing with management. When the petty-bourgeoisie refused to apply the charter in the workplace, the workers led strikes and occupations to implement the Mwonzogo charter.⁵⁴

In a speech he gave in Hamburg in 1978, Rodney drew even more radical conclusion from his reflections these workers struggles. He revealed that strikes of the early 1970s were not organised by trade unions – they were wildcat strikes spontaneously organised by the rank-and-file. He saw in them a new source of power that challenged TANU state-led socialism. Rodney reflected on instances where workers' struggles went beyond demands for wages to ask “who should control production? Who is the boss in a so-called socialist society?”⁵⁵ In one rubber factory, he explained, the workers locked out management and ran the factory causing panic and fear among the bureaucracy. The workers realised their power when they said, “We as workers are capable of running this enterprise more efficiently than the economic bureaucracy.”⁵⁶ So the petty-bourgeoisie, Rodney held, crushed these revolts fearing that they could spread across factories and destroy its existence as a class. Rodney had realised that workers developed a revolutionary consciousness through their struggle – they had the power to propose a new democratic and collective way of organising society.⁵⁷ Rodney thus returned the core of Marxism, which sees the working-class as the only class that can liberate itself and the whole of society. If Nyerere and TANU could not deliver socialism, it had to be won from below.

Chapter 8: Rodney's views on Pan Africanism (1974)

Leaders from Africa and the diaspora gathered in Tanzania to attend 6th Pan African Congress of June 1974. It was the first time an African nation hosted the Congress – Black intellectuals of the diaspora had organised previous ones in Europe. Rodney, however, was disappointed with Nyerere for disallowing grassroots organisations from participating in the debates. He

⁵⁴ *see* Rodney, 1975a.

⁵⁵ Rodney, 1975a.

⁵⁶ Zeilig, Leo, 2019.

⁵⁷ *See* Zeilig, Leo, 2019.

feared the Congress would reflect the conservatism of African leaders unable to offer radical solutions to Africa's problems. So he wrote a provocative article for the event to address the key issue of African unity and denounce the impotence of petty-bourgeois leaders.

In his article, Rodney conceived Pan-Africanism as a weapon in the struggle against imperialism. It was not an ideology, but a historical movement to unite Africans beyond the artificial borders that colonialism created. He was appalled that most independent nations accepted these colonial borders. If Africa remained fragmented, it would stay vulnerable to incursion from Western companies seeking to rob its wealth. He argued the Panafricanism of "the petty-bourgeois states became a sterile formulation (...) incapable of challenging capitalism and imperialism"⁵⁸. He therefore saw the Organisation of African Unity, the predecessor of the African Union. Created in 1963, the OAU at best regulated conflicts between African dictators while it sanctified existing borders to ensure that the elite kept ruling over the masses in their states.

Rodney's article offered insight into the treacherous and cowardly nature of the class that ruled Africa after independence. The petty-bourgeoisie, he said, once played a progressive role by leading the anticolonial struggle and voicing its support for Panafricanism. But it reneged on African unity when it negotiated independence lacking the vision and the economic power to enforce that unity. Rodney here shadowed Frantz Fanon who held that the petty-bourgeoisie owns nothing and will provide nothing.⁵⁹ Besides leaders like Nyerere and Nkrumah, most sought to get rich by becoming agents of the western bourgeoisie, never seeking to defy imperialism. Its control over the state (the police, the army and the bureaucracy) meant it had a vested interest in maintaining colonial borders. That way Africa's new ruling classes ensured that multinationals dealt with them, and that workers and peasants stayed oppressed and exploited.

Seeing the petty-bourgeoisie as the biggest obstacle toward African unity, Rodney argued that Panafricanism had to be driven from below. He called on Africans to struggle against the Western capitalist class and its African allies. They must break from imperialism and build a socialist society that would free the masses from exploitation. Which class was to lead that struggle? In 1974, Rodney's article did not give a definitive answer. He

⁵⁸ Rodney, Walter, 1975b, "Aspect of the International Class Struggle in African, the Caribbean and America" in *Pan-Africanism*, www.marxists.org/subject/africa/rodney-walter/works/internationalclasstruggle.htm

⁵⁹ See Rodney, Walter, 1975b,

knew Panafricanism had to be an internationalist, anti-imperialist and Socialist weapon in the hands of progressive groups and organisations. Perhaps he saw the seeds of a new leadership the guerrilla struggles and workers movement in Southern Africa when he wrote: “our brothers in the South are striking blows, which include attacks on enemy bases in Angola, the destruction of rail links in Mozambique, the disruption of production through strikes in Namibia and South Africa”⁶⁰. That was before he realised that the working class in Africa and the Global South was the only class able to lead African liberation to socialism.

As Rodney fell ill before Pan-African Congress, he did not attend and read his powerful article. Moreover, he thought it was time for him to return to Guyana. Rodney thought he would never be able to fully relate to Tanzanians and grasp their idiom. He told one his students, “I have to go back to people I know and who know me”⁶¹. Rodney had made important contributions to the African liberation struggle, which inspired countless radical African students and intellectuals. But he was only an academic moving in academic circles. He was never content with being a radical intellectual – he wanted to be a revolutionary. He longed to build a close relationship with working people and play an integral part in their struggles against exploitation. He felt that could only be done back home.

Chapter 9: A Difficult Return to Guyana (1974 -1976)

In Guyana, a multiracial gathering was a rare sight. Yet, in August 1974, two to three thousand African and Indian Guyanese rallied in front of the University of Georgetown to support Rodney. They had heard that Burnham’s regime pressured the academic overturned his appointment as head of the history department. Angered by that decision, the university staff union and students boycotted classes for two weeks while the Bar Association went on strike. Many intellectuals launched a global campaign to reinstate Rodney who gained an international reputation for his scholarship on African history.⁶² Rodney had not even left Tanzania, yet he was already the focus of protest and a major political issue for the government. Burnham and his cronies feared Rodney because of his past activism in Jamaica and his popularity among the Guyanese masses. Rodney was an advocate of racial solidarity and a Marxist critic of the government,

⁶⁰ Rodney, Walter, 1975b,

⁶¹ Issa Shivji in Chung, Clairmont (ed.), 2012, pp.89.

⁶² Boukari-Yabara 2010, pp 496-498.

which divided the Guyanese across race and kept them in poverty. He knew he would return to a country that was different from the one of his childhood.

Rodney, who had left Guyana at 18 years of age, did not live through her decline into racial violence. The racial solidarity of the anti-colonial movement crumbled after the British overthrew the People Progressive Party's (PPP) elected government in 1953. The imperial coup produced a split between the PPP's two leaders, the African lawyer Burnham and the Indian Dentist Jagan. Burnham now accused Jagan of "being a communist stooge"⁶³ and left to create the People National Congress (PNC). The ideological split turned into a racial one as both parties mobilised for election on the basis of racial loyalty. Indians remained in the PPP while Africans joined the PNC. The PPP won the 1957 and 1961 legislative and local elections because it relied on votes from the Indo-Guyanese the majority rather than on past legitimacy. The Cold War, however, interfered again into Guyanese politics to ensure the PPP's defeat in 1964. The CIA financed a coalition between Burnham's PNC and the United Force which represented the Portuguese and Chinese local capitalist. The Americans wanted avoid to that Jagan, the communist turned Guyana into a second Cuba once independent from Britain. Thus Burnham's coalition led Guyana to independence in 1966 because he enjoyed good relations with the United States.⁶⁴

The electoral campaigns, however, revived the old tensions between Africans and Indians, which culminated in violent clashes between 1961 and 1964. The deadliest confrontations unfolded in the spring of 1964 when the colonial government sent African scabs to break the strike of Indian sugar workers. Ten years later tensions were still high as Burnham and the Afro-Guyanese bureaucracy dominated the state and kept scapegoating Indians. That was the country that Rodney returned to September 1974.⁶⁵

Patricia and the kids, who had relocated before Rodney, welcomed their father upon his arrival in Georgetown. They struggled to adjust to life in Guyana. Patricia missed her African friends and the hospitality she encountered in Tanzania. She disliked that people did not greet each other in Guyana and that her children were bullied in school because of their African

⁶³ Premdas, Ralph, 1982, "Guyana: Changes in Ideology and Foreign Policy", *World Affairs*, Vol. 145, No. 2, p183.

⁶⁴ See Premdas, 1982, pp.141 and Lewis, 1998a, pp. 5-13.

⁶⁵ Andaiye, and D. Alissa Trotz, 2020, *The Point Is to Change the World: Selected Writings of Andaiye*. (Pluto Press), pp 59-74.

names and accents. Moreover, Patricia was refused employment in health care when hiring managers found that she married Rodney. Yet, she secured a job and a house in spite of the government's hostility towards her husband. Rodney, however, was jobless as the protest failed to achieve his reinstatement. The little he earned came from the lectures he gave overseas teaching at Cornell University from January to May 1975. But, he decided to stay in Guyana and fight Burnham's denial of the right to work.

Interviewed in 1976, Rodney accused the government of using control over jobs to intimidate people. "This control is important", he said, "we are a small-undeveloped economy with a large unemployed sector – to retain one's job is a matter of life or death."⁶⁶ He then claimed Guyanese workers could not seek work elsewhere because the state had become the largest employer. Burnham's regime had nationalised eighty per cent of the economy, which included the bauxite mines and sugar plantations. This takeover of foreign companies represented Burnham's opportunistic shift in ideology to what Rodney called pseudo-socialism or bureaucratic state capitalism. The Prime Minister had reneged his anti-communism and alliance with America, as Guyana's production and exports had fallen. Burnham now looked to Cuba and China for economic assistance and declared Guyana a Socialist Cooperative Republic. Burnham's ideological zigzag enabled him to promote himself as a progressive leader abroad, though his citizens saw him as a dictator.⁶⁷

Burnham and the PNC kept alive the tensions between Africans and Indians to divert attention from its failure to provide jobs, transport and decent health care. They rigged elections and granted senior bureaucratic position to Africans while purging their opponents. The state shot and arrested PPP activists and blamed Indian sugar workers for stealing the nation's revenue when they went on strike. The key issue of racism in Guyana preoccupied Rodney who spent his days writing articles and speeches on that question. He travelled across the country; conducted interviews among his people and researched archives for his famous book, a *History of the Guyanese working people 1880-1905*. Rodney's formidable body of work provided a Marxist explanation of the divide between African and Indians.

Chapter 10: Race, Class and Guyanese politics

⁶⁶ Dr David Hinds (2014) In the Sky's Wild Noise: A documentary on Dr. Walter Rodney (online video) available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=> (assessed August 2020).

⁶⁷ Premdas, 1982, pp.184-194.

Rodney's writings and speeches on race and class in Guyanese history elucidated how capitalist exploitation created the conditions for modern racism. Speaking on this topic at Columbia University in 1978, Rodney presented racism as a product of capitalism when it developed as a global system in the 1600s. Europe's ruling class invented it to justify African slavery in the New World to produce goods for the world market. Racism, he said, always stems from the interest of the exploitative classes.⁶⁸ This meant the racism between Guyanese African and Indians workers was not a matter of natural prejudice or cultural difference. In fact, this divide originated in the colonial plantation society, which brought Africans as slaves and then Indians as indentured workers. As a Marxist, he regarded racism in Guyana as the consequence of the white planter class's divide and rule strategy to control labour after the abolition of slavery in 1838.

In his article on the *Plantation Society in Guyana* and his *History of the Guyanese working people*, Rodney first recognised that racism among workers arose out of competition over jobs. He explained most ex-slaves became plantation workers and fought the planters over decent wages and working conditions. They even organised two general strikes right after emancipation. Although the strike of 1841 won, that of 1847 failed because the planters imported indentured Indians as scabs. The white planter class had introduced cheap and precarious labour from India to break the rising African militancy. Rodney also showed that Indian indentureship created excess labour in British Guyana that enabled the planters to use unemployment to control the workforce. If Africans refused terms of employment, they feared Indians might replace them. At the same time, as Rodney notes, indentured immigration split the working class. African workers performed skilled labour such as cane-cutting while the Indians did the menial tasks.⁶⁹ This competition meant that African workers despised Indians as job stealers and tools of the planters. Conversely, Indians saw Africans as lazy workers that would have starved without indenture. As Rodney claimed they "began to relate to each of via the white (Planter) stereotype."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ A speech Rodney gave to black student at Columbia university, in 1978 Kilombo Uk (2015) Walter Rodney: Race and Class in Guyanese Politics, (online video) available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9szjOu-yIPs&t=965s> (assessed August 2020).

⁶⁹ Rodney, Walter, 1981b, "Plantation Society in Guyana", *Fernand Braudel Center*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 657-664.

⁷⁰ Rodney, 1981, p664. See also Rodney, Walter, 1981a, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press.), pp174-189.

Secondly, Rodney identified that all ruling classes in Guyana deliberately fuelled the racial tension between Africans and Indians workers. He recorded instances where the white planters of the 19th and 20th century mocked both African and Indians in their newspapers. This “divide and rule” fragmented and weakened workers the face of capitalist exploitation. Rodney notes in his *Plantation* that wages stagnated from the 1840s until the end of indenture in 1920.⁷¹ In his speech at Columbia, Rodney claimed the African and Indian elite of the 1970s inherited the old racist manipulation to defend its interests as rulers. He explained the African middle class emerged, through the colonial schooling, offered in towns, as teachers, junior civil servants and sometimes lawyers. The Indian elite, however, emerged from the plantation as landlords and merchants. The African elite, which saw itself as the heir to the colonial state, opposed the Indian elite who also wanted state power to support its businesses. From the 1930s to the 1970s, both elites deployed racism to mobilise their communities against each as they battled for the state. By mobilising on the basis of race, both elites could also hide the class difference between them and their workers.⁷²

Rodney observed that while the class struggle was fragmented in the 1800s, Africans and Indian workers often united against the bosses in the next century. Rodney devoted the final chapter of his *History of the Guyanese working people* to the 1905 rebellion; Indian sugar workers mounted a strike that spread to the African cane-cutter and stevedores setting the stage for an unprecedented multiracial alliance. But the colonial state rushed to crush the revolt before the alliance took shape.⁷³ 1905 showed Rodney that racial unity was possible on the basis of class struggle. By fighting for higher wages, Africans and Indians workers realised their common interests and overcame their racial prejudices. At Columbia University, Rodney mentioned that workers united again in the strikes of 1924, 1938 and the 1950s during the anti-colonial movement. He said that colonial governors saw this workers unity as the biggest threat to the colony. And he predicted that it would be the Achilles heels of Burnham’s dictatorship.⁷⁴ Rodney’s Marxist writings on race and class raised the idea that racism could only be abolished through a revolution that united African and Indian workers against their exploiters.

⁷¹ Rodney, 1981b, p659

⁷² Kilombo Uk (2015) Walter Rodney: Race and Class in Guyanese Politics, (online video) available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9szjOu-yIPs&t=965s> (assessed August 2020).

⁷³ Rodney, 1981a, pp174-189.

⁷⁴ Kilombo Uk (2015) Walter Rodney: Race and Class in Guyanese Politics, (online video) available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9szjOu-yIPs&t=965s> (assessed August 2020).

While Rodney admired the spontaneity of Guyana's multiracial strikes, he saw their shortcomings. The ruling class reversed the solidarity they engendered when it restored order. Rodney concluded that workers' spontaneity needed to be channelled by an organisation. His concern was how African and Indian workers could forge an irreversible bond through organisation.⁷⁵ In this respect, he saw the anti-colonial alliance of the 1950s as a fragile one, resting on the electoral ambitions of Jagan and Burnham. Rodney aspired to politicise the masses in ways that had not been done before. So he joined the Working People Alliance in 1976 to fight racism and the Guyanese Dictatorship.

Chapter 11: The Birth of the Working People Alliance

The racial conflict in Guyana produced a political system that only allowed space for Burnham's PNC and its opposition, Jagan's PPP. Both parties preached a version of socialism from above favoured the petty bourgeoisie's control over the state, never the masses. Burnham blatantly discriminated the Indo-Guyanese while Jagan talked about racial unity but only campaigned among Indians when it came to elections. In 1974, amidst this political deadlock, the Working People's Alliance (WPA) emerged as an anti-racist and anti-imperialist formation that advocated for socialism from below. It was not an electoral party, but a small pressure group that united Pan-Africanist and Indian Socialist organisations aspiring to build mass action against Burnham's dictatorship. Rodney, however, joined the WPA as one of its few independent members. He befriended Eusi Kwayana, the group's co-founder and Guyana's most famous Pan-African activist, who had left both the PPP and PNC out disgust for their racist politics. Many of the twelve WPA members had also grown disillusioned with major parties and sought a new politics to overcome the racial divide among the working masses. Rodney's uncompromising use of Marxist theory and practice to foster working-class unity helped them to find it.⁷⁶

One of The WPA's first major anti-racist intervention occurred when it defended an Indian PPP activist Arnold Rampersaud, who the PNC framed for the murder of an African policeman. At the solidary rally, Rodney gave

⁷⁵ Kilombo Uk (2015) Walter Rodney: Race and Class in Guyanese Politics, (online video) available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9szjOu-yIPs&t=965s> (assessed August 2020).

⁷⁶ On WPA's creation see Andaiye, and D. Alissa Trotz, 2020, pp87-94 and Westmaas, Nigel, 2004, "Resisting Orthodoxy: Notes on the Origins and Ideology of the Working People's Alliance." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp 63-81

a moving speech calling on the Afro-Guyanese to resist Burnham's attempt to manipulate them against the Indians. When a policeman ordered Rodney to stop speaking, the multiracial audience surged forward, removed the officer, and allowed him to finish talking. Thus began his transformation into a full-time organiser of the working people. The Guyanese then respected Rodney as a Marxist scholar and activist still unaware that he was soon to become their chosen one.⁷⁷

Rodney helped the WPA establish bases; he led reading groups and spoke at public meetings in Georgetown and the Bauxite mining regions. He enjoyed lecturing miners on Marxist political economy and the Russian Revolutions of 1917. The WPA influence among the Indian sugar workers was less notable because it did not seek to infringe upon the territory of their allies, the PPP. It, however, convinced African miner to donate in support of the Indian workers during the 135-day strike of 1977 and 1978, the longest in Guyanese history. The WPA's collection cracked the idea that all Africans were scabs as Burnham had sent unemployed Afro-Guyanese to replace or terrorise the strikers. The Guyana agriculture workers union invited WPA members to speak at their public meeting. Rodney again impressed the masses; the crowd grew bigger and bigger and overflowed onto the streets as he spoke about racial unity. When the WPA speaker left to attend another rally nearby they were surprised to see that the crowd had followed them.⁷⁸

The WPA was not a sect executing acts of heroism on behalf of the people. It relied on mass support and action to oppose the Burnham government. Rodney and his comrades talked at length on how to work with non-revolutionary organisations that wanted to end Burnham's rule. In 1978, they campaigned with the PPP, trade unions and civic organisations to boycott the PNC's referendum to reform the constitution and extend Burnham's presidential powers. The regime nevertheless declared victory despite the low voter turnout. Shortly before the WPA became a political party in 1979, it proposed a multi-party government of national unity to replace the PNC dictatorship. This mistaken strategy, which never materialised, contrasted with the WPA's previous alliance with working class and grassroots organisations over specific aims. It now sought to include the petty-bourgeoisie to form a bourgeois government. Rodney

⁷⁷ Kwayana, Eusi, 1988, "Walter Rodney: The Prophet of Self-Emancipation" *Libcom.org*, 2015, libcom.org/library/walter-rodney-eusi-kwayana.

⁷⁸ Kwayana, Eusi, 1988.

ignored that what he called “a patriotic compromise”⁷⁹ always subordinated workers’ interest to that of the aspiring bourgeoisie. Although it sometimes made mistakes, the WPA was nonetheless rooted among the working people and active in their struggles.

The organisation produced a single newssheet called *Dayclean*, which its members distributed at protests and rallies. This workers paper did not stop at exposing the dreadful conditions of the working people. It provided a critical overview of Burnham’s state capitalism, of racism in Guyana and outlined the significance of popular struggles against it. WPA, however, failed to turn *Dayclean* into a substantial newspaper because the Burnham’s PNC banned free press. The police raided the WPA offices, seized all ink and printers and arrested those who sold the paper. The WPA, however, strove to print *Dayclean* when possible alongside pamphlets and manifestos that reflected its socialist ideology: To lead the revolution in each country; promote women and education; fight against racism and build a classless society.⁸⁰ The rise of the civil rebellion of 1979 would encourage the WPA to transform itself into a mass revolutionary party that would pose as a real alternative to Burnham and Jagan.

Chapter 12: The Civil rebellion, the WPA and the Working People.

On 11 July 1979, at around 2 am, someone set the Ministry of National Development on fire. Burnham knew whom to blame for the arson though he had no proof. In the afternoon, the police arrested Walter Rodney and six WPA leaders. The dictator hoped to silence his opponents but little did he know that the arrest would turn the WPA into a mass party with Rodney as the people’s leader. When news of the arson spread across the country, working people in Georgetown, on the cane fields and in the mining communities gathered to discuss and condemn the arrest. In the capital, hundreds joined the WPA’s pickets in front of prisons to identify the whereabouts of the prisoners and to campaign for their freedom.

On the 14 July, thousands rallied in front of the courthouse demanding bail for the arrested. So great was the outcry that the Judge agreed to release the WPA leaders against the PNC wishes. Upon hearing the good news, the multiracial protesters marched in triumph through Georgetown. All the political parties and organisation that opposed Burnham’s dictatorship

⁷⁹ Rodney, Walter, 1979, “People’s Power, no Dictator”, *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 8, No.1, pp64-78.

⁸⁰ Boukari-Yabara 2010, pp531.

figured among those who supported the WPA. But the euphoria vanished. Burnham deployed an armed militia, the House of Israel, to break the demonstration. The attackers beat a British Jesuit journalist Bernard Darke to death and wounded two WPA members. State repression did not tame the masses but fuelled them with rage; they launched the Civil Rebellion against the PNC's dictatorship.⁸¹

From July to November 1979, mass protests and strikes shook PNC dictatorship. The people expressed their anger at the cuts on wages, health care and transport that the PNC imposed on them to reimburse the loans from the IMF in 1978. They held the government responsible for the high unemployment rates, which stood at 30 per cent. Faced with deteriorating living standing and lacking democratic rights, they could no longer tolerate the corruption that plagued the ruling party. Burnham grew nervous upon learning that African Bauxite miners mounted a strike that paralysed the bauxite industry. It was the first time he faced a major rebellion among his African supporter base. The miner's strike against the public sector wage freeze also spread to parts of the civil service. At first, the dictator refused to declare the strike illegal as he usually did, not wanting to frustrate many PNC trade unionists that were involved. But Burnham's greatest fear became reality when 20 000 Indian sugar workers struck in solidarity with miners a month later. Faced with the prospect of a multiracial general strike, Burnham and his cronies felt that power was slipping out their hands.⁸²

In the pamphlet he wrote during the rebellion, *People's Power, No Dictator*, Rodney told the masses about the central importance of strikes for advancing the political struggle against dictatorship:

“United strike action teaches us how the dictator can be exposed and how he can be deposed. (...) The dictator requires the population to produce so as to sustain himself and the clique of parasites who dominate Guyana. That is why the mass withdrawal of labour is the ultimate weapon representing the power of the people.”⁸³

Rodney and the WPA tried to ensure that people supported the workers through their individual and collective acts of resistance to Burnham. On the

⁸¹ Kwayana, Eusi, 1988.

⁸² Kwayana, Eusi, 1988.

⁸³ Rodney, Walter, 1979, p.74.

20 July, the WPA organised its largest ever rally, which attracted 8000 people to the Bourda Mall stadium in Georgetown. Rodney delivered a fiery speech where he declared the “the PNC must go by any means necessary”⁸⁴. Never had the Guyanese people heard someone articulate their feelings with such honesty and courage. A week later the WPA established itself as Marxist-Leninist revolutionary party geared towards the conquest of state power. Rodney and his comrades understood the rebellion called on them to connect and direct all the struggles that erupted in the towns, mines and the countryside. They aimed to transform these localised struggles over wages and democratic rights into general ones against the dictatorship. And they knew this task meant doing more extensive and intensive organising and agitating among the working people than before. So they opened the WPA’s membership to the hundreds of African and Indians youth that asked to join them. The WPA created education class called “nuclei” for its new party-cadres, where they read radical literature, such as Lenin’s *What is to Be Done* and Amilcar Cabral’ *Party Principles and Political Practices*.⁸⁵

What did the WPA stand for? “The alliance is revolutionary and not reformist,” it asserted in its programme. The WPA meant here that socialism could only be achieved through the self-emancipatory struggles of the oppressed masses against their rulers. Rodney expressed this idea when he said that “the revolution is made by ordinary people, not by angels, it’s made by people from all walks of life, and more particularly by the working class who are in the majority”⁸⁶. It therefore rejected the idea that a small group of enlightened leaders could gradually deliver socialism to the passive and benevolent masses. This understanding made the WPA different from the PNC who limited socialism to state ownership of the economy by a handful of bureaucrats. It also made the WPA different from the PPP who saw elections –winning a majority in the Assembly and passing laws – as the means to deliver socialist change. The WPA equally opposed the cult of personality that evolved around Forbes Burnham and Cheddi Jagan. “We profoundly distrust the Messiah approach of political parties,” said Rodney, “we are trying to mobilise the energies of the vast majority of the population.”⁸⁷ Unlike PNC or PPP, The WPA established a collective

⁸⁴ Kwayana, Eusi, 1988.

⁸⁵ Westmaas, Nigel, 2004, p.74.

⁸⁶ Rodney, Walter, 1980, “Sign of the Times” <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/>

⁸⁷ Rodney quoted in Boukari-Yabara 2010, p532.

leadership of 15 members with a rotating chairmanship to ensure nobody monopolised power.

Inspired by the theory of the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, the WPA stood for the “permanent revolution in each country”⁸⁸. Seventy years before, Trotsky argued the working class must lead the other oppressed classes in underdeveloped countries. By providing a strong lead, the working-class would not only fight for democracy, but also for the expropriation of the bosses and socialism. The WPA’s programme of 1980 voiced democratic demands such as land for the peasants, the right to work, freedom of the press. These accompanied its socialist calls for workers control over the factories and the creation of worker’s council as new ruling organs. Permanent revolution further meant spreading the revolution beyond national borders, as Trotsky had argued.⁸⁹ WPA members build ties with the Grenadian socialist who overthrew their dictator in March 1979. That year, they observed with excitement the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, the Iranian revolution and Surinamese Coup. The rise of the Civil Rebellion offered them hope that Guyana was next in line.

The Rebellion “saw almost the whole society creeping out of the shadows into the light of hope, standing in defiance of the power that was (...) imposing economic and financial oppression and hardship”⁹⁰, wrote Eusi Kwayana. The mass rallies that the WPA organised at the height of the rebellion turned into spontaneous marches. In the countryside and the towns, people took to the streets drumming and chanting their favourite slogan: “People Power no Dictator”. Rodney’s activism was relentless during Rebellion – He travelled across the country to organise and speak at rallies. People promoted his meeting by word-to-mouth, never with leaflets. He appeared, spoke and captivated the masses, then left before the police or Burnham’s thugs could catch him. His speeches broke he the wall of silence and fear around the dictatorship as he mocked Burnham, baptising him “King Kong”⁹¹. Rodney thus emerged out Guyana’s highest moment in history as the revolutionary leader of the people.

⁸⁸ Boukari-Yabara 2010, p531.

⁸⁹ Sookhedo, Ronnie, 1981, “For a socialist Caribbean”, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol>. For more information on what the WPA stood for see Working People’s Alliance, 1980, “Toward a Revolutionary Socialist Guyana.” *The Black Scholar*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp42–49. doi:10.1080/00064246.1980.11414082.

⁹⁰ Kwayana, Eusi, 1988.

⁹¹ Rodney, Walter, 1979, p.

Chapter 13: Rodney's Death and Aftermath

In November 1979, Rodney spoke at a meeting on the corner Lamaha Street in Georgetown. But the PNC's armed thugs stormed on the gathering and chased Rodney through the capital. Rodney narrowly escaped with life after hiding in a trench of faeces and then reached his friend's home "smelling like an unwashed ram goat"⁹². It was not the first time Rodney had to run to safety but the ferocity of his assailants signalled that Burnham wanted to eliminate opposition by all cost. Some of Rodney's comrades were not so fortunate; the police shot and killed Ohene Koama that same month. The death of this leading WPA member implied a decline in the civil rebellion. Rodney observed signs of the movement's retreat as the state's repression made it difficult for the WPA to organise in the streets. The police sabotaged the WPA cars, equipment and detained Rodney on three occasions between September and October.⁹³ Rodney and WPA leaders knew the mass meetings and protests of the summer shielded them from onslaughts from the state. But the vanishing struggle left them exposed. They moved from house to house to avoid police raids and harassment asking why had the movement ebbed?

Eusi Kawayana argued that Civil Rebellion retreated with the collapse of workers' strikes, which he saw as the backbone of the movement.⁹⁴ There was frustration among the WPA leaders as the united action of the miners and sugar workers failed to grow into a general strike. The WPA was not rooted among the sugar workers to raise their combativeness as they still suffered from the defeat of the 135-day strike of 1978. Its influence had not extended beyond the capital and some mining regions. In May 1980, Rodney criticised the defeatism of the leadership of the PPP, trade unions and anti-dictatorship groups who failed to grasp the destructive potential of the strikes and protests – they believed the regime would be left unshaken.⁹⁵ The opportunistic PPP only saw industrial action as a platform for its electoral campaigns, while the trade union leaders lacked the confidence to withstand the threats from the state. After bullying the unions into submission, the state fired the most militant workers replacing them with scab labour.

⁹² Gibbons, Arnold, 2012, *The Legacy of Walter Rodney in Guyana and the Caribbean*. (University Press of America), pp182-185.

⁹³ Lewis, 1998a, pp237-38.

⁹⁴ Kwayana, Eusi, 1988.

⁹⁵ Lewis, 1998a, pp238-239.

The WPA claimed that Guyana was not ripe for revolution because the armed forces failed to join the protesters during the Civil Rebellion. Some of its leaders adjusted to the downturn by focusing on building new WPA branches and working towards the Government of National Unity. Did Rodney welcome that change in direction? WPA leader Rupert Roopnaraine said Rodney ached to revive the mass movement fearing it would be forever lost. In April 1980, Roopnaraine helped smuggle his friend to Suriname, so he could fly to Zimbabwe's independence to seek support and weapons to reignite the Civil Rebellion. "When that didn't happen", said Roopnaraine, "he was in a very low place, morale had dropped. (...) Walter was always very sensitive about the need for militancy."⁹⁶ The pressure from Burnham's repression and attacks on the WPA had led Rodney to consider armed struggle. His strategic shift reflected his commitment to guerrilla struggle that he inherited from reading Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon. The armed struggle had recently liberated Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe from colonialism. Rodney, however, did not live to see how these struggles crucially ignored the working class as the agent of revolution. Robert Mugabe, for instance, suppressed the strike movement of 1981 that swept Zimbabwe right after independence.

After Rodney's death, his mentor CLR James would say that he overestimated the readiness of Guyanese workers to take up arms against Burnham. James also presumed Rodney paid no attention to training WPA leaders and cadre in the art of insurrection – he instead wanted to lead by example and take his own risks.⁹⁷ Many WPA leaders were unaware of some preparations for insurrection. According to Roopnaraine, some resigned from the executive, disappointed by the lack of accountability from their peers, upon learning that Rodney had been smuggled to Zimbabwe. WPA Leaders also failed to trust and inform their members. Assuming too many spies infiltrated the rank-and-file, they made the buying of arms, from the army, their sole duty. "We found ourselves at all hours of the night in strange places, doing dangerous things (...) the miracle is that more of us didn't get killed"⁹⁸, Roopnaraine confessed. But, Burnham and the PNC murdered Rodney.

⁹⁶ Rupert Roopnaraine in Issa Shivji in Chung, Clairmont (ed.), 2012, pp111.

⁹⁷ James, CLR, 1988, "Walter Rodney and the Question of Power", *Race Today Publications*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/>

⁹⁸ Rupert Roopnaraine in Chung, Clairmont (ed.), 2012, pp.113 and see p.109-124.

On 13 June 1980, Rodney and his brother Donald went to buy walkie-talkies from an ex-army officer, Gregory Smith. They did not suspect that Smith was a PNC informant. When Rodney activated the device in his car, it exploded and killed him. The Guyanese working people wept the loss of their leader while Burnham rejoiced. The next day the police and the army patrolled the streets fearing that Rodney's death would spark another uprising. They raided Rodney's mother's house searching for weapons, and anonymous leaflets appeared on the streets with a message: "he who lives by the bomb shall die by the bomb".⁹⁹

Rodney's funeral was the largest ever held in Guyana. Thirty-five to Fifty thousand Guyanese of all races, ages and genders attended his funeral to wish their beloved leader farewell. Patricia led her husband's procession chanting "fight back, fight back"¹⁰⁰. Rodney once said that when revolutionaries fall, "they are lost, it's an irreparable loss that may (...) qualitatively affect the development of the struggle in another phase."¹⁰¹ His death represented that loss for socialist revolution in Guyana.

After Rodney died, the WPA did its best to continue the struggle. It established bases across the country in spite of Burnham's repression. The party, however, gradually relinquished its socialist program to adopt an electoral strategy after Burnham's illness and death in the mid-1980s. The new strategy made it incapable of challenging the racial divide that still plagues Guyana today. The WPA hardly performed well in elections. Could African and Indian Guyanese be expected to vote for the multiracial WPA after being shaped by centuries of racial oppression? Of course not, they continued to be mobilised against each other by the heirs of the PNC and PPP. The tragic episode of racial violence that followed the PPP's victory in Guyana's first free elections of 1992 showed that real change could not be achieved through the ballot box.

All of Rodney's writing and activism in Guyana had underlined the centrality of class struggle for fighting racism. It's only by fighting against the ruling class in the streets and the workplaces that African and Indian workers could realise their common interest, and overcome their prejudices.

⁹⁹ Boukari-Yabara 2010, p.54

¹⁰⁰ Tchaiko Kwayana (2010) Eusi Kwayana on Walter Rodney (online video) available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_c5Hatb-0Y (assessed September 2020)

¹⁰¹ Rodney quoted in Boukari-Yabara 2010, p26.

Every victory whether big or small could strengthen the confidence of the working class and encourage its unity against capital. Rodney saw the revolutionary party as essential for destroying the racist ideas in the minds of workers and for shaping the fight for socialism. If the workers failed to overcome their racial divide, they would be unable to defeat capitalism.

Conclusion: The Prophet of Self-emancipation

In his short biography of Rodney, WPA leader Eusi Kwayana identified Rodney as the prophet of self-emancipation.¹⁰² Everywhere he went, Rodney fought with the working people, inspiring them to conquer their freedom. The more he travelled and engaged with the masses, the more he embraced Marxism as his theory and practice of working-class revolution. Rodney's activism Jamaica underlined the duty of revolutionary intellectuals in the struggle against imperialism. The radical intellectual does not belong in the university. He must go to the oppressed, learn about their struggles, and use his intellect for their liberation. Rodney accomplished that by meeting with Rastafarians and listening to radical youths. His ability to understand the masses led him to deliver a powerful message of Black Power. He articulated grievances of the masses while telling them to reclaim the Caribbean from imperialism and its local allies. Rodney, however, did not yet fully grasp the relevance of Marxism for the Global South.

His leap from Black Power activism to socialism began when lived in Nyerere's Tanzania. Rodney used Marx's historical method to write his masterpiece *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. He produced a history of the exploitation of African workers and peasants by the western bourgeoisie, to prove that Africa's development was impossible until it broke with capitalism. He left Tanzania convinced that enlightened leaders could not deliver socialism— it had to be won from below. Rodney had discovered in the strikes of Tanzanian the unrivalled power and militancy of the working class. Only they had the power and the vision to build a new democratic society, a socialist one.

Rodney developed his appreciation of worker's power when he returned to Guyana and organised for the WPA. His writings, speeches and activism revealed the importance of Marxism for explaining and fighting racism. He saw racism as produced by capitalism, wherein capitalists divided the working-class to ensure its exploitation. He proposed to end it with a

¹⁰² Kwayana, Eusi, 1988.

revolution that united African and Indian workers against Burnham's dictatorship. Rodney then recognised the need for a mass revolutionary party to foster that racial unity. His WPA, however, was too small and inexperienced to lead the Civil Rebellion to victory. If the mass party had established itself years before the rebellion, it perhaps would have been better prepared to influence the struggle. But the WPA never recovered from Rodney's death.

Although Rodney died at only 38 years of age, he left behind him a colossal body of work that will inspire the next revolutionaries. That makes him the prophet of self- emancipation.

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Walter Rodney was almost the same age as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King when the ruling class murdered him on June 13th 1980. This speaks to the relentless battle he waged against the horrors of capitalism in his mere 38 years of existence. He should be revered as one of the great radical black leaders of the last century. Rodney is best known for his famous book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (HEUA), which he wrote in Tanzania. Yet, his incredible journey and contributions to the struggle of the oppressed are unknown or remembered in pieces. Some remember him as an influential Black Power advocate in Jamaica. Few know about the time he spent in Africa. Fewer remember the socialist struggle he led before his death in Guyana.

The author, Chinedu Chukwudinma, is a socialist activist and writer based in London. He writes on African politics, popular struggles and the history of working-class resistance on the continent and is a member of ROAPE's editorial board. Chukwudinma is researching the life and work of Walter Rodney at the University of Oxford.