

REVIEW ESSAY

by

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[*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. By Walter Rodney. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, and Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1972.]

*Colonization and civilization?*

*In dealing with this subject, the commonest curse is to be the dupe in good faith of a collective hypocrisy that cleverly misrepresents problems, the better to legitimize the hateful solutions provided for them.*

*In other words, the essential thing here is to see clearly, to think clearly -- that is, dangerously -- and to answer clearly the innocent first question: what, fundamentally, is colonization? To agree on what it is not: neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law. To admit once for all, without flinching at the consequences, that the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies.*

Aime Cesaire

The history of African scholarship has been a great evasion and manipulation of history and facts to avoid a confrontation with the ugly legacy of colonialism and imperialism. The thousand and one books that have gone to print since Ghana became independent in 1957 about modernization have in one way or another been either an exercise in intellectual apologia

or a great celebration of imperialism. But here at last is a book that confronts and exposes the ugliness of imperialism not to let us hang our heads in shame but to point the way forward to a better future. Africa need not mourn about the rape Europe visited on her but she must put herself together, as they say, and begin to repair the damage to her economic, political and social fabric.

Rodney's new book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, is a significant milestone, not just as an exposure but also as a work of science in the field of political economy. Any written work to earn the status of being called scientific has to fulfill the following minimum conditions: it must understand reality in its historical totality as well as its current constituent parts. Secondly, it must uncover what lies behind the obvious; that is, it must not only describe the facts, but it must explain them. Explanation is a statement of process; what, how, why, are the questions that a scientific explanation answers.

Presently, the studies of African underdevelopment violate this minimum condition. Either the studies are concerned with the statistical forms of manifestation of underdevelopment-- for example, absence of industrialization, low level of skills, number of telephones, low consumption of fuel; or the historical dynamic by which the absence of industry, low skills, etc. came about is not investigated. True, some do consider perfunctorily colonial history, but when it comes to explaining the present they proceed to ignore it -- in particular, its long range distorting effects on the economies of present day Africa. What we have as theories of development are quantitative additions and subtractions or indices. There is no search for the processes which explain these indices.

Rodney's book is not just a model study of the evolution of underdevelopment, it is also an example of historical social analysis, truly committed to placing the morphology of the historical process at the center of his analytical effort. Presently, the literature on the colonial situation is a series of monographs on such topics as "pre-colonial Africa," "Colonial policies," "the influences of Christianity," "acculturation studies," all studied as independent factors. There almost never has been an attempt at a synthetic account of imperialism as a total system whose dynamic cannot be fragmented into its individual manifestations.

I have said that Rodney's book is a study in political economy of Africa's underdevelopment advisedly. There is a further unfortunate tendency in the sciences today. Attempts are made to isolate "economics" from "politics" and to divorce

the present from the past. This has meant that there are "economic," "political," "psychological," "sociological" and even "anthropological" theories of underdevelopment. Almost by definition these disciplinary approaches prevent a comprehensive treatment of the relationships of underdevelopment which are not only historical, but include the interaction of the economic, political, sociological and psychological factors.

The method of political economy and its totalistic approach will look very "unscientific" indeed to those wedded to narrow disciplinary approaches -- that is, to those who are increasingly interested in minute partition of concerns and competences. The recent trend towards interdisciplinary approaches is not a development toward a total and integrated image of society. It is rather a mechanical integration of partial disciplinary approaches all equally concerned with playing down the possibility of an integrated approach. The multi-disciplinary approach merely adds and compounds the weaknesses of each discipline. Rodney's approaches stand as a critique and in opposition to the fragmentation of reality which is not mitigated by interdisciplinary developments.

Walter Rodney's book has provided us in exactly three hundred and sixteen pages with the frightful history of the rape, retardation and deliberate destruction of the peoples and economies of the African continent for the benefit of the peoples of Europe. It is a history told with dispassionate candor and herein lies its effectiveness. Before Africa came into contact with Europe in the fifteenth century, it may have been undeveloped, but certainly it was not underdeveloped. This distinction has to be borne in mind always. Underdevelopment is an historical process of primitive exploitation and oppression of Africa for the benefit of Europe. The actual history of this process is one of slavery, conquest, murder, robbery and force. Yet as Marx once wrote "in the tender annals of [bourgeois] political economy the idyllic reigns from time immemorial."

The contrast between bourgeois economic theories of underdevelopment and the genuine history of plunder that was visited on Africa by Europe over the past five hundred years (as presented by Rodney) is the contrast between mythical description embodied in the theories of modernization found in economic, political, sociological and anthropological textbooks (that have flooded the market since Africa and other former colonies became independent) and the actual history of what happened since Africa became "a warren for the hunting of black skins."

Colonization and imperialism brought about the decay of the institutions of African peoples -- that is, whatever institutional and cultural forms existed prior to colonial rule and conquest became either inoperative, even if the forms were retained, or started a process of decay. These decaying or inoperative institutions were used by the colonizer to manipulate the people. Secondly, colonization brought about social isolation; it sealed off African communities one from another and it sealed off their relationship with their environment by confining them in reservations. This forced isolation would lead to atrophy. When change took place it became an individual experience -- as in the case of migrant workers.

In every section of this book, Rodney exposes the ways in which Africa was historically pillaged and underdeveloped by Europe, while he also discusses and exposes some of the comfortable theories that have been peddled by bourgeois social scientists to mask Africa's underdevelopment. Since Ghana became independent in 1957, bourgeois ideologues have triumphantly announced what they call stages of economic growth or pattern variables associated with the process of development and underdevelopment. The paradigms of development/underdevelopment all take for granted the nature of capitalism and imperialism -- in particular the relationships that have historically existed between Europe and Africa and which are crucial if one is to understand Africa's underdevelopment. The omission of important questions regarding the nature of imperialism is striking. The overall impression given by the bourgeois theories is that development and underdevelopment are either works of the Almighty or are genetically derived.

Walter Rodney, in page after page, systematically illustrates the fact that relations between Africa and Europe were relations based on exploitation and oppression. As a result, the underdevelopment of Africa is as much the product of capitalist exploitation as is the development of Europe the result of the looting of Africa's wealth and manpower. Therefore, development and underdevelopment are simultaneous processes caused by the same historical processes. The European capitalists starting as slave traders used the surplus acquired from this nefarious trade to accumulate fortunes, which while accelerating the growth of Europe, retarded and even caused the regression of African economies. He sketches with broad strokes the historical forms by which Africa's wealth was gradually siphoned off to enrich Europe. The history of how Europe underdeveloped Africa is a story of primitive rape and recklessness.

What is underdevelopment? According to Che Guevara underdeveloped economies are comparable to a dwarf.

*A dwarf with an enormous head and a swollen chest is 'underdeveloped,' inasmuch as his weak legs or short arms do not match the rest of his anatomy. He is the product of an abnormal formation that distorted his development. That is really what we are -- we, who are politely referred to as 'underdeveloped,' but in truth are colonial, semi-colonial or dependent countries. We are countries whose economies have been twisted by imperialism, which has abnormally developed in us those branches of industry or agriculture needed to complement its complex economy. 'Underdevelopment' or distorted development, brings dangerous specialization in raw materials, inherent in which is the threat of hunger for all our people. We, the underdeveloped, are also those with mono-culture, with the single product, with the single market. A single product whose uncertain sale depends on a single market that imposes and fixes conditions -- that is the great formula for imperialist economic domination. It should be added to the old, but eternally young, Roman slogan 'Divide and Conquer.'*

According to Rodney, Africa's connection with imperialism became "an indispensable component of modern underdevelopment." Underdevelopment expresses "a particular relationship of exploitation: namely the exploitation of one country by another." (pp. 21-22). That is, Africa has been within the orbit of the world capitalist system since the era of the Atlantic slave trade. The bonds that developed between Africa and Europe over a period of four centuries were on the basis of the international capitalist division of labor, whose cardinal principle is domination and subjugation, exploitation and oppression of the weak by the strong.

*"In order to understand present economic conditions in Africa, one also needs to know why so much of its present wealth goes to non-Africans who reside for the most part outside of the continent." (emphasis by Rodney, p. 29).*

With exceptional force and clarity Rodney exposes why Africa has realized so little of its wealth, while showing at the same time why not a single bourgeois social scientist has been able to ask, let alone answer, these questions. Confronted with the paradox of underdeveloped countries being rich in natural resources while poor in living standards some bourgeois economists resort to downright falsification of the real world and resort to biblical explanations.

*Mistaken interpretations of the causes of underdevelopment usually stem either from prejudiced thinking or from the error of believing that one can learn the answers by looking inside the underdeveloped economy. The true explanation lies in seeking out the relation between Africa and certain developed countries and in recognizing that it is a relationship of exploitation. (p.30)*

The book is divided into six chapters: Chapter I deals with 'theories' of Africa's underdevelopment and Rodney's refutation of these pseudo-theories. Chapter II deals with African societies and their development before the coming of the Europeans. African civilization reached a kind of apogee in the 14th and 15th centuries in various parts of the continent. During that era states and empires waxed and waned depending on the class forces in formation and the fortunes and circumstances of particular rulers. In elucidating the evolution of African societies prior to European conquest Rodney focuses on the prevailing modes of production and concomitant relations of production. Thus he is able to see African societies as totalities whose social relations were anchored in particular modes of production. Kinship structures are seen not as independent arrangement, peculiar to the 'primitive' African, but as functional relations in the context of certain productive modes. Briefly in this chapter, Rodney shows that African societies before the coming of the Europeans were not in a state of timeless presence, but that the African continent was throbbing with life.

*Even among clans and lineages that appear roughly similar, there were considerable differences. However, it was possible to distinguish between what was uniquely 'African' and what was universal in the sense of being characteristic of all human societies at a given stage of development. It is also essential to recognize the process of dialectical evolution from lower to higher forms of social organization; and, in looking at the most advanced social formations, one would*

*appreciate the potential of the continent as a whole and the direction of change. (p. 41).*

The imposition of colonial rule disrupted the historical continuity of African societies. The natural roots and springs of their development were distorted; their economy, technology and culture were undermined and left in a truncated state. The elements which structured their philosophy of life, their art, literature and the family structure were ridiculed and reduced to a marginal relevance and thus lost their ability to renew themselves.

Colonial rule is a destruction of the autonomous development of a people and their creative powers as well. During the colonial era no African could build anything, no matter how much of a genius he may have been (cf. Rodney, p. 145). The African, during the colonial era experienced deliberate retardation, and those who 'made it' made it in spite of the handicaps placed before them. "The connection between Africa and Europe from the 15th century onwards served to block [their] spirit of technological innovation both directly and indirectly." (p. 115).

In Chapter 4, Rodney deals with Europe and the roots of African underdevelopment in 1885. In discussing slavery it is customary for the bourgeois historians to resort to a self-serving game of apportioning blame. They tell us that African chiefs and military leaders used the slave-trade for personal enrichment or they play a game of numbers saying that the number of men Africa lost has been exaggerated. The third argument says that slave labor was unprofitable. Rodney explodes all these myths with all the contempt they deserve. He shows quite clearly that while the slave-trade was conducive to the primary accumulation of capital in Europe, it was to the detriment of developments of African economies. Slavery and the slave trade deprived Africa of that part of her population that was the strongest and best able to work. The result was the stagnation of productive forces at the village level.

The fifth and sixth chapters deal respectively with Africa's contribution to the capitalist development of Europe during the colonial era, and with colonialism as a system for underdeveloping Africa. Imperialism is the highest and the last stage of capitalism and its consequences for Africa reflected the terminal cruelties of capitalism -- that capitalism in its moribund stage.

*Imperialism was in effect the extended capitalist system, which for many years*

*embraced the world -- one part being the exploiters and the other exploited, one part being dominated and the other acting as overlords, one part making policy and the other being dependent. (p. 19)*

In the period 1870 to 1890, the European capitalist powers carried out the territorial division of Asia and Africa. Before that certain European powers had established colonial enclaves in which white settlers were in the process of dispossessing Africans of their lands. At the end of the 19th century the seizure of new colonies as markets and as spheres of capital investment and as sources of raw materials was complete. The question which immediately comes to mind is how and why this sudden headlong race? Jules Ferry, addressing the French Parliament on July 28, 1885, gives the honest answer. The French minister declared:

*Under conditions of a crisis experienced by all the branches of the European industry the establishment of colonies means the establishment of markets . . . Gentlemen, we should shout at the top of our voices and with more sincerity. We should say openly that the higher races have superior rights relative to low races. . .*

This, not too unfairly, sums up pretty much a common attitude of the imperialist toward what Kipling called "the lesser breeds without the law." What was the result? Europe carried out the suppression and exploitation of the African in the name of humanity. The attitude of imperialism had the most fatal consequence for the African people. They were conquered with fire and the sword, they were brutally treated and exploited in a thousand ways (by capital exported to exploited raw materials, through concessions, through cheating in the sale of goods; they were made to submit to the authorities imposed by their erstwhile conquerors, etc.). By merely enumerating the consequences of imperialist domination of Africa, Rodney provides a frightful indictment of imperialism and shows it to have been the worst enemy of the African people.

To gain a clear insight into the specific features of the underdevelopment of Africa by capitalistic forms of exploitation we must not only compare it with development of capitalism in West Europe, but must understand the dynamics of dependency. According to Dos Santos (1971):

*dependency . . . mean(s) a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected. The relation of interdependence between two or more economies, and between these and the world trade, assumes the form of dependence when some countries (the dominant ones) can expand and can be self-starting, while other countries (the dependent ones), can do this only as a reflection of that expansion, which can have either a positive or a negative effect on their immediate development.*

The concept of dependence, Dos Santos tells us, enables us to see the internal situation of the underdeveloped countries as part of the world economy. European industrial development was dependent upon the internal retardation of the economies of the colonies. Where a threat was felt by the metropolitan industries tariff walls were erected to protect them. When Africa was colonized and divided among various imperialist countries foreign capital was the sole master. The conquest and domination of Africa enable foreign monopolies to set up in the continent only those enterprises and produced only those raw materials and goods which were demanded and complementary to the economies of their own countries. That is, within the sphere of the international division of labor, the imperialist bourgeoisie specialized certain regions in Africa as raw materials suppliers for industrial production in the imperialist countries. The state of underdevelopment in various regions of Africa took on the character of the colonial power. Those countries of Africa which fell under Portuguese colonialism took the backward character of Portuguese underdevelopment while those countries which fell under Britain, France, etc. showed some distorted development.

However, 'development' which was intended to complement the requirements of the metropolitan economies was limited to the exploitation of mining, building of railways and harbors, cultivation of cash crops and primary processing enterprises. During the fifties of the present century Africa's share in output as the adjunct of the world capitalist economy was as follows: diamonds - 96 percent, cobalt - 67 percent; gold - 64 percent, manganese ore - 42 percent, copper - 25 percent, uranium - 24 percent. The development of the manufacturing sector was extremely poor. At the turn of the decade of the nineteen fifties, when most countries of Africa north of the Zambezi gained their independence, their share of industrial output amounted to only 1-2 percent of the industrial output of the entire capitalist world.

Rodney illustrates how the international system of colonialism-imperialism led to the all-round dependence of African countries. This dependence was articulated most clearly in the sphere of economic dependency. The specialization of Africa for raw material production turned the entire continent into an appendage of the imperialist world. When we deal with imperialism we are dealing with structural problems: a set of relations which did not allow Africans to deal with reality in their own terms. Rodney puts it thus:

*In offering the view that colonialism was negative, the aim is to draw attention to the way that previous African development was blunted, and turned back. In place of that interruption and blockade, nothing of compensatory value was introduced . . . To mark time or even to move slowly while others leap ahead is virtually equivalent to going backwards. Certainly, in relative terms, Africa's position vis-a-vis its colonizers became more disadvantageous in the political, economic, and military spheres.*

*The decisiveness of the short period of colonialism and its negative consequences for Africa spring mainly from the fact that Africa lost power. Power is the ultimate determinant in human society, being basic to the relations within any group and between groups. It implies the ability to impose one's will by any means available. (pp. 244-245)*

This passage is quoted at such length to illustrate why it is that everything built on the African continent during the imperialist era, and for that matter built with Africa's sweated labor was practically the continuation of the productive forces of the metropolitan countries. Mines, plantations, railways, seaports, highways and even towns and cities belonged to foreign monopolies. The result was the structural integration of the African economy within the economy of alien capitalism. The colonial capitalism bequeathed to African states is underdeveloped. The French economist Francois Proux remarked that: "When a large firm sets up a concern in a small country, the concern is doubtless situated in the so-called 'national' territory of the smaller country. In reality, however, it belongs to the firm's own area." The most decisive and glaring result of this integration was that African capitalists after independence had very little room for maneuver. Paul Baran explains why:

*Whatever market for manufactured goods emerged in the colonial and dependent countries did not become the 'internal market' of these countries. Thrown wide open by colonization and unequal treaties, it became an appendage of the 'internal market' of Western capitalism . . . . When limited industry did emerge, completing swiftly the entire journey from progressive to regressive monopoly role in the economic system, they became at an early stage barriers to economic development rather similar in their effect to the semi-feudal land ownerships prevailing in underdeveloped countries. . . . Thus in most underdeveloped countries capitalism had a peculiarly twisted career.*

In a nutshell this explains the 'twisted career' of the bourgeois class in Africa also. It is clear that the African 'capitalist' class could not properly be described as a 'national bourgeoisie' nor is it the Schumpeterian entrepreneurial type, in the true sense of enterprising. It was created compromised from its birth and hence its distorted and compromised ideology of African socialism and its political rule through one party states. The African bourgeoisie appeared in the world too late to be either capitalist or democratic and for the same reason wanted to consider itself 'socialistic.' The capitalistic ideology had been hopelessly played by capitalism and therefore to justify its dependency and petty capitalistic aspirations it had to cover itself in various "varieties of African socialism." The 'bourgeoisie' attempted to cleverly make use of the emasculated theory of socialism in order with its help to entrench themselves as guardians of the neo-capitalistic state. The contrast made by Fanon between the dynamic entrepreneurial bourgeoisie of nineteenth century Europe and the corrupt and enfeebled administrative bourgeoisie of Africa is confirmed by Walter Rodney.

*It has been noted with irony that the 'principal' industry of many underdeveloped countries is administration. Not long ago, 60% of the internal revenue of Dahomey went into paying salaries of civil servants and government leaders. The salaries given to the elected politicians is higher than that given a British Member of Parliament, and the number of parliamentarians in underdeveloped African countries is also relatively high. In Gabon, there is one parliamentary representative for every 6,000 inhabitants, compared to one*

*French parliamentary representative for every 100,000 Frenchmen. Many more figures of that sort indicate that in describing a typical underdeveloped economy it is essential to point out the high disproportion of a privileged few." (p. 27)*

The state in Africa is more than just the guardian of the interests of the ruling class: it is, itself the major entrepreneur and a means whereby the African petty bourgeoisie that is excluded from the country's centers of economic life, by imperialism can advance itself. The alliances and conflicts of clientele classes with other domestic classes are shaped largely by their previous and present alliances with foreign interests. Political power in the absence of economic power is a *sine qua non* for the perpetration of African dependency to imperialism. The only way of overcoming the structure of dependency is to break loose from imperialism, and this can be achieved only with the mobilized African masses. Quite obviously, in Africa we are dealing with exploitation in its various forms -- economic, political and social -- which cannot be mitigated by naming these countries 'developing societies.'

The weaknesses of bourgeois theories of economic development:

The economics of poverty in Africa is rivaled only by the poverty of its politics. It is a well-known fact that before you can cure an illness you have to diagnose its cause. All erroneous ideas, like poisonous weeds, must be subjected to criticism and must not be allowed to spread unchecked. The theories of "modernization" or economic development that have been offered by bourgeois theorists have been intended either to obfuscate the real causes of Africa's backwardness or have been ideological struggles against Marxist analysis of imperialism and underdevelopment. The developing national liberation movements, like the developing class struggle after the bourgeoisie had assumed political reign in Europe, sounded the death knell of scientific bourgeois economy.

*"It was henceforth no longer a question, whether this theorem or that was true, but whether it was useful to capital or harmful, expedient or inexpedient, politically dangerous or not. In place of disinterested enquirers, there were hired prize-fighters; in place of genuine scientific research, the bad conscience and the evil intent of apologetic." (Marx, Capital Vol. I, p. xxiii.)*

Most bourgeois 'theories' of development and underdevelopment do not go beyond the limits of justifying and defending in one way or another the capitalist road of economic development, and *ipso facto* defending the role of colonialism and imperialism in Africa. The various theories were called up to justify the neo-imperialism of our time. The emancipation of Africa came at a time when imperialism was struggling for its very existence with forces of socialism. The process of African political and economic emancipation carries concealed in it a threat to the very existence of the system that thrives on imperialistic exploitation. In order to keep African countries within the capitalist orbit it became imperative to hide the nature of underdevelopment in Africa behind psycho-social justifications. At issue in social and economic development bourgeois theories is not capitalistic and imperialistic exploitation of these countries but their own psychological state. In the bourgeois theories of economic growth the nature of capitalist society and economy is such that the institutions of capitalism take on the aura of timeless, perpetual existence. This seeming "appearance" has led many bourgeois scholars to divide the world into three -- the capitalist world, the socialist world and the so-called Third World.

*Indeed, it is one of the functions of those who justify capitalism (bourgeois writers) to try and pretend that capitalism is here to stay. A glance at the remarkable advance of socialism over the last fifty-odd years will show that apologists for capitalism are spokesmen of a social system that is rapidly expiring. (p. 18)*

To conclude the review of this extremely complex book it is useful to remind ourselves that several attempts will be made by bourgeois scholars to ignore, and if that does not succeed, to fault this or that aspect of the treatment of the subject of underdevelopment of Africa by Rodney. Whatever faults exist in this book they should not be allowed to confuse the issues. Errors of judgment can and must be properly criticized, but these do not and should not be allowed to distract us from the broad lines of Rodney's argument. His book is a welcome relief from the modern fad in African history which has replaced an earlier fad in anthropology, whereby a researcher studies the oral history of an isolated African community to

reconstruct its 'history' for its own sake. This idle curiosity should not be allowed to stand in the way of the analyses directed at the impact of colonialism and imperialism in African societies no matter how much money may exist for studying such trivia.

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