

WALTER RODNEY--PEOPLES' HISTORIAN

By

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In 1848 the European working class was in a state of ferment. The ravages of burgeoning industrial capitalism changed the social make-up of the society and the embryonic working class revolted against the inhuman conditions of this early form of capitalism. Karl Marx responded to this working-class revolt with his penetrating analysis of capitalism and a vigorous call for the emancipation of the working class. Marx fused the intellectual traditions of German philosophy, French socialist thought and English political economy to develop the theory of scientific socialism. Lenin combined this understanding with the theory and practices of social change and at the same time, took pains to show how the development of monopoly capitalism and imperialism led to the inexorable process of expansion, domination and partition. Lenin, like Marx before him, recognized the tremendous contribution made by Africa to the accumulation of capital during the epoch of the slave trade. The fact that he did not deal with Africa at any great length in the context of imperialism was not an oversight, for in that time, Africa was marginal to the development of capitalism.

By the end of World War II the colonial revolts in all parts of the globe placed the question of colonized peoples squarely within the context of the struggle for a new social order. Walter Rodney, born in a society with the sores of colonialism, slavery and indentureship, at an early age, grasped the need for a level of scientific inquiry which would strengthen the tradition of Marx, Engels and Lenin.

Marx and Engels struggled against the bourgeois ideology of Hegelianism. With Rodney, it was the struggle against the racism of the bourgeois ideologists with respect to African history and oppressed peoples in general. His study of the slave trade and the Upper Guinea Coast in West Africa was a bold attempt to transcend and correct the distortions and myths of those historians who justified colonial domination. Rodney embarked on the ambitious project of reconstructing the history of the voiceless millions of Africans who worked and died. His study of Portuguese, Italian and Spanish, and his immersion into the well-preserved Portuguese archives helped him paint a picture of Upper Guinea society in the mid-sixteenth century, while it was still free of profound European influence. Walter Rodney's research which was published by Oxford University Press as A History of the Upper Guinea Coast 1545-1800 broke new ground in challeng-

ing the falsehoods on the slave trade and the writing of African history as such, and not as an appendage to anything else. At the same time he broke the practice of bourgeois historiography which projected colonial boundaries into the precolonial period.

This major academic work, his doctoral thesis, completed when Rodney was only twenty-four years old, marked the first quest by Rodney to assert the view that for the blacks of the world, it was not only a question of a fight against oppression and exploitation but also a fight to gain recognition that Africans were a part of humanity. He said:

As long as there are people who deny our humanity as blacks, we must proclaim and assert our humanity as blacks.

Class struggle was henceforth a struggle to end the racism which had been buttressed by theology and pseudo-science in the twentieth century and had been circulated internationally through the Anglo-American media.

Walter Rodney remained close to his working-class upbringing and did not allow his competence and training to blind him to the conditions of the oppressed. He saw the link between the work he was doing and the voiceless millions who made history. He possessed the ability to communicate advanced scientific and materialist ideas in a manner which would be easily understood by the working poor, and he demonstrated this with his Groundings with the Rastafari and unemployed in Jamaica. In enriching the popular understanding of Africa and Ethiopia, Rodney stressed that the black intellectuals must attach themselves to the black masses. Such a commitment by an intellectual threatened those who manifested scorn on the poor. Rodney inserted himself among the poor not in a populist manner, but in a way that lent his experience and study to their insights handed down through traditions of oral history. He said:

The collective knowledge of the African people derived from experience is the most authentic basis...of the history of the colonial period. Unfortunately, much of that experience is not yet written down.

Walter Rodney was banned from Jamaica by the then JLP administration with the silent complicity of the opposition--a ban which was never lifted by the Manley administration. From Jamaica he returned to teach at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. At that time the revolution in Zanzibar had strengthened the progressive forces within Tanzanian society and Dar es Salaam was the headquarters of the liberation groups fighting

against colonial rule in Mozambique, Angola, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The Tanzanian society was in a state of ferment and Rodney helped to inspire an intellectual tradition which made the University of Dar es Salaam one of the centers of discussion on African politics and history. Where the Frankfurt School of Philosophy and contemporary European Marxists revelled in a level of abstract theoretical inquiry which reinforced the distinction between mental and manual labor, the Dar es Salaam school developed a brand of Marxism which was concretely linked to the process of armed struggle and liberation which was in process in southern Africa. Walter Rodney learned a great deal from the theory and practice of both Amilcar Cabral and Che Guevara. He particularly wanted to reinforce the affirmation by Cabral of the need to revise the concept that the motive force of history is the class struggle. Cabral had stated,

Those who affirm--in our case correctly-- that the motive force of history is the class struggle would certainly agree to a revision of the affirmation to make it more precise and give it an even wider field of application if they had a better knowledge of the essential characteristics of certain colonised peoples, that is to say people dominated by imperialism.

Cabral wanted to avoid the position where human groups in Africa were characterized as peoples without history because of the existence of history before class struggle. Rodney attempted to specify the historical stages of the classes in Africa and how this development was hampered by colonialism. In the context of the African liberation struggle he made this important contribution in the work How Europe Underdeveloped Africa. In order to clarify the fact that development was not a unique European phenomenon and to show that Africans were involved in the process of making history before the arrival of the Europeans, Rodney devoted the early part of his book to an examination of the dynamics of human social development on the African continent in the centuries prior to colonial rule, paying particular attention to the achievements like Egypt, Ethiopia, Western Sudan and Zimbabwe. He was careful not to transpose mechanically the lessons which Marx had analyzed in his examination of social development in Europe, especially with reference to the stages of historical development. He said:

In Africa after the communal stage there was no epoch of slavery arising out of internal evolution, nor was there a mode of production which was the replica of European feudalism.

Marx himself was sensitive to the paucity of knowledge in his era on non-European societies and he recognized that the schema of human development from primitive communism to capitalism could not adequately explain the richness of historical variety, especially with respect to Egyptian and Chinese civilizations. He himself had chosen a new formulation--the Asiatic modes of production--to depict those societies which were not based on slavery or feudalism. This characterization showed deep insight but in this century, many Marxists seek to find everywhere the same historical categories analyzed by Marx in Europe. Rodney avoided this pitfall and demonstrated how capitalism in the form of colonialism failed to perform in Africa the tasks it had performed in Europe in changing social relations and liberating the forces of production. Technological stagnation, low agricultural productivity and poverty were buttressed by a form of colonialism which entailed forced labor, compulsion to grow cash crops and an arsenal of authoritarian laws which left a legacy of anti-democratic practices and commandism in Africa. He showed how the system had trained certain Africans to perpetuate these commandist practices of the colonial era and how they were now entrenched in the neocolonial phase. He stressed that "not only are there African accomplices inside the imperialist system, but every African has a responsibility to understand the system and work for its overthrow."

The nature of the African ruling class, its contempt for the workers, its lack of foresight and lackluster imitation of everything European had been analyzed with such accuracy by Franz Fanon. Rodney developed these analyses with concrete background information on the formation of the petty bourgeoisie and how they were essentially the sergeant majors for the multinational corporations. He wrote critical articles in Tanzanian Ujaama on the problems of state and class formation in Africa and on the need for socialist transformation. As an independent thinker he did not identify Marxism or socialism with any particular nation-state and in 1980, he reinforced this position in the context of the Working Peoples' Alliance:

There is still a preference among many of the Third World Marxists and/or radicals for orienting themselves toward a very specific body of theory and analysis and at an international level to the point where it becomes an identification with a particular nation-state. We have attempted to avoid this and we believe it is the correct position, but perhaps the correctness of the position will only show itself in a period of time.

This conception and experience Rodney took to the Caribbean when

he returned to Guyana in 1974. The need for independence has been sharpened by the confusion wreaked by the petty bourgeoisie and their counterparts in the Caribbean who were caught in the squalor of neocolonialism but used progressive rhetoric, nationalization and pseudo-socialism as a way to hide their own aggrandizement.

Many of the leaders in Africa and the Caribbean still carried out repression within the old Cold War context of anti-communism, but neocolonialism had entered a new stage where pseudo-socialism was adjudged to be more effective than anti-socialism in maintaining control over working people. This was certainly true in Guyana where Forbes Burnham, who had come to power through Anglo-American intervention, now poses as the leading socialist and supporter of liberation movements. Rodney inserted himself into the struggle of the Guyanese working people and exposed the limits of this rhetoric. He was not deterred by Prime Minister Forbes Burnham, who had blocked his appointment as Professor of History at the University of Guyana. Rodney chose to stay and share his knowledge with his people and spearheaded the unification of the left with the unleashing of a new political thrust which sought to break the racial barriers created between the Indian and African workers. This took organizational form in the Working Peoples' Alliance. Under the rot which was taking root in Guyana by 1975, Rodney had identified the process of political retrogression in the Caribbean and noted that the central aspect of this brand of neocolonial politics was:

- 1) the concentration of power in the hands of a petty bourgeoisie;
- 2) the destruction of popular political expression and participation;
- 3) the manipulation of race and other divisions among the people;
- 4) the institutionalization of corruption;
- 5) the extension of political repression and victimization;
- 6) the vulgarization of 'national culture' as a tool for class rule and,
- 7) the deliberate distortion of revolutionary concepts.

Various combinations of the above elements aid the implementation of policies which allow the reproduction of the petty bourgeoisie as a class in the midst of declining material standards for the vast majority and simultaneous with the accelerated expatriation of surplus by the multi-national corporations.

He concluded that:

Neither socialism nor any form of democracy can be achieved in the Caribbean under the

petty bourgeoisie. Probably the most important conclusion which can be drawn from contemporary political trends in the English speaking Caribbean is that working class power is the only guarantor for economic growth and political democracy which precede and accompany socialism as a system of social justice.

Guided by this dictum, Rodney took up the task of writing the history of the Guyanese working class while working as a full-time political activist in the Working Peoples' Alliance. This party was in the process of unleashing a new political culture which was guided by the principle that the self-organization of the workers was the way to break the anti-democratic legacies of slavery, indentureship, colonialism and neocolonialism. This conception of politics and socialist transformation which was being developed within the ranks of the Working Peoples' Alliance and articulated in its Principles and Programmes, represented a threat to a regime which hid behind socialist gimmickry while using political power to deepen the colonial authoritarian practices.

Rodney stood for a new kind of openness, honesty, plain speaking and reliability which endeared him to the working poor. In his communion with the workers both at public rallies and at bottomhouse meetings he levelled shafts of wit at the uncrowned monarch, "King Kong," who was in the process of outlining a new constitution to make himself life president. Two of these speeches have been published as The Struggle Goes On and Peoples Power No Dictator. Here Rodney elaborated themes and ideas which were to lay the basis for new forms of social organization. He escaped the pitfall of scholars who felt that they could chart the process of struggle for the working class and remarked in an interview in 1980 that "there is, both from a theoretical point of view as well as from the point of view of anyone engaged in politics, a clear distinction between spontaneity in protest and the organization of that spontaneity and the self-organization of peoples so that they carry themselves from one stage to a higher stage."

His insistence on the self-emancipation of the workers and small farmers was coupled with the materialist interpretation of the racial divisions in the society so that the workers could understand how these divisions had historically been manipulated to ensure their own exploitation. This thesis was developed in his last piece of scholarship, The History of the Guyanese Working Class (forthcoming from Johns Hopkins Press). He travelled to dig out the records of the Guyanese plantation and also worked in the poorly kept archives in Guyana; commenting on the problems of doing proper work in that environment, he lamented the fact that:

The whole spirit of mendacity which prevails in the society could hardly be compatible with this search for truth and producing serious scholarship, although I will concede that historically there are times in the depths of the most backward systems that great literature has been produced.

In the atmosphere of terror and an arson trial, Walter Rodney was able to complete a considerable amount of historical research and writing. He completed the volume on the working class along with the editing of a History of Guyanese Plantation in the 19th Century. As a historian, he was painfully aware of the divisions that the race question had left in Guyana. He was clear that the race question was much more a historical and social question than a biological problem. In an effort to get to the minds of the youth, his last project was the completion of a children's story-book on the history of the races in Guyana.

Walter Rodney left a legacy of hard work and a spirit of critical enquiry which will be an inspiration to a new generation of scholars whose work will reflect the struggles of their people. Rodney's life and death expose the limitations of those who pay lip service to socialism while silencing Marxist intellectuals and where the working class as a whole have been excluded from democratic participation and social reconstruction. He was an internationalist, a humanist, a Marxist and an independent-minded scholar whose theoretical contribution will be of service to mankind.

Rodney's work has helped to uplift the cultural level of Guyanese and Caribbenn societies. His emphasis on the building of working-class organization was clear, and in Transition he forcefully left this lesson for Marxists the world over.

The necessity for social change in the Third World arises out of the conjuncture of contradictions in the system of capitalist/imperialist production. But the appreciation of this necessity and its historical implementation requires the political organization of these social classes with an objective interest in the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a society freed from the exploitation of labour. The leap from evolution within capitalism to evolution within socialism is no mere spontaneous process. It involves changing levels of consciousness, building working class organization and self-discipline, and above all, the

revolutionizing of the state and hence the character of all subsequent social and political intervention.