

BOOK REVIEW: *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, by Walter Rodney. Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House and London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972; 1 0.65; Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974; \$10.50.

The publication, in 1970, of Walter Rodney's first major work<sup>2</sup> was widely acclaimed as a significant contribution to the emerging body of literature which endeavors to reinterpret African history from an African perspective. In some ways this work also represents the only concession that Rodney ever made to Western norms and criteria of scholarship with respect to form and content. For Walter Rodney has always stood out as a militant writer whose deep concern for the development of Africa stems from a profound conviction that the root cause of exploitation and underdevelopment lies in the capitalist system and Imperialism.

Rodney has always been an outspoken advocate of African and Pan-African Socialism,<sup>3</sup> and this has made him, despite his West Indian origins, somewhat of a "persona non grata" in Jamaica (since 1968) and most recently in Guyana, his own country. His country's leaders did not judge him fit for teaching in their academic institutions because of his uncompromisingly radical opinions.

In many respects, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* is the work of a militant addressing himself to other militants, and more importantly, to the common people rather than to the elite. This fact accounts, to a large extent, for the "unconventional" format of the book. Written in a sober, simple language easily accessible to the layman, the book contains none of the usual footnoting characteristic of "scholarly" works. Instead, a brief reading guide is given at the end of each chapter, not so much to indicate the author's sources than as a supplementary reading for the interested reader. While this might prove unsatisfactory to the scholar in view of his need for references and bibliographical accuracy, it can be seen as the most appropriate device to reach the public for which the book is intended, for, as the author himself explains,

*The purpose has been to try and reach Africans who wish to explore further the nature of their exploitation, rather than to satisfy the "standards" set by our oppressors and their spokesmen in the academic world. (p.8)*

This attitude might account for the fact that, outside some notorious exceptions,<sup>4</sup> the book has been squarely ignored by the major academic journals, which have otherwise given extensive attention to such "orthodox" studies as that of A.G. Hopkins,<sup>5</sup> to which Hildebrand refers in a recent article.<sup>6</sup>

Although Rodney's approach is multidisciplinary, his work remains, basically, that of an historian. It is essentially an inquiry into the causes for the state of underdevelopment in which Africa finds herself today. For it is obvious to the author that a clear understanding of the present and a sound assessment of future developments rest on a correct understanding of the past:

*This book derives from a concern with the contemporary African situation. It delves into the past only because otherwise it would be impossible to understand how the present came into being and what the trends are for the near future. (p.7)*

The book covers the period from the fifteenth century to the end of the colonial period. According to the author, one needs to go that far back in time, if not further, in order to understand why Africa is underdeveloped. In essence, Rodney's main intention is to demonstrate the direct correlation existing between the development of Europe and the underdevelopment of Africa. For that purpose, he uses a strictly Marxist methodology, which is not without problems, as will be seen later. Accordingly, he sees development and underdevelopment as the two opposites of the same dialectical process; similarly, just as capitalism breeds underdevelopment, socialism engenders development. This comes out clearly of the definitions of development and underdevelopment given by Rodney. His view is that development cannot be seen purely as an economic phenomenon, but rather as an overall social process. Consequently, his definition of "economic development" is a broad, "historical" one:

*A society develops economically as its members increase jointly their capacity for dealing with the environment. (p.10)*

Such a capacity is determined by the extent to which men master knowledge and endeavor to apply it scientifically to a transformation of the productive forces and of the relations of production.

According to Rodney's definition, development can be shown to have taken place in many places and at many times in the history of mankind:

*Every people have shown a capacity for independently increasing their ability to live a more satisfactory life through exploiting the resources of nature. (p.11)*

Conversely, underdevelopment

*... expresses a particular relationship of exploitation: namely, the exploitation of one country by another... the underdevelopment with which the world is now pre-occupied is a product of capitalist, imperialist and colonialist exploitation. (pp.21-22)*

Furthermore, the capitalist development of Western societies has fed itself on and been rendered possible only by the continuous exploitation of African labor and resources, through the successive stages of slavery, Imperialism and Neo-colonialism. Western capitalist development and African underdevelopment are dialectically related to each other:

*... development and underdevelopment are not only comparative terms... they also have a dialectical relationship one to the other: that is to say, the two help produce each other by interaction... It meant the development of Europe as part of the same dialectical process in which Africa was underdeveloped. (pp.84, 162)*

Rodney then sets out to describe how this process developed over the centuries. In the early phase, that of pre-fifteenth century European penetration, one witnessed the development of African societies according to two main criteria: the increase of social stratification and the emergence and consolidation of socio-political formations (states). Egypt, Ethiopia, Nubia, the Maghreb, the Western Sudanic Empires (Ghana, Mali and Songhai) and Zimbabwe are variously cited as evidence of such development.

The author then proceeds to demonstrate in what ways Africa contributed to European capitalist development in the pre-colonial period, mostly through the Atlantic slave trade, seen as a basic factor of African underdevelopment. In chapter four, the problem of the roots of African underdevelopment in the pre-colonial period is dealt with in some detail. The thrust of Rodney's argument in this respect is that African contact with Europe through trade was inherently detrimental to African development. Not only did it discourage technological evolution and blocked Africa's access to

its own technology, but it also initiated a process of disruption and disintegration of the local economies, paving the way for European exploitation through imperialist subordination and dependence. This gave rise to a constantly widening gap between the socio-political, economic and technological development of Europe and that of Africa, a gap which is still widening nowadays.

Under colonialism, the process of economic exploitation and surplus transfer initiated during the pre-colonial period was continued and significantly speeded up. One of the major consequences of colonialism was to strengthen the Western European ruling class and Capitalism as a whole. What it led to was a typical "growth without development" process in Africa, through economic exploitation, "comparative disadvantage" and unequal exchange. This thorough analysis leads to the logical conclusion that

*African development is possible only on the basis of a radical break with the international capitalist system, which has been the principal agency of underdevelopment of Africa over the last five centuries. (p.7)*

Similar conclusions have been reached, on the basis of their own work, by such "neo-Marxist" economists as Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin. It necessarily follows that a Socialism in the service of the two more oppressed and dynamic classes in the history of mankind in general and of Africa in particular -- the workers and the peasants -- becomes the only possible and desirable ideology for the development of Africa.

Succinctly stated, such is the main thrust of Rodney's argument. Rodney's approach to his subject is not exempt of criticisms. One could first of all take issue with his dating of the beginning of European capitalistic development to the fifteenth century (as corresponding to the period of European penetration of the African continent). While Wallerstein seems to agree with Rodney on this point, Frank and Hobsbawm see the 16th and 17th centuries respectively as being the crucial watershed as far as the emergence of capitalism is concerned.<sup>7</sup> More serious are the problems with Rodney's definition of development which, although justified in an historical context, remains too general to be operational in a modern situation. In particular, he never offers an explicit definition of "socialist development" which, presumably, is his ideal type of development.

Furthermore, it seems difficult to accept unconditionally the idea that "socialist countries are not involved in the robbery of Africa", an idea eloquently expressed by the French Marxist

economist Pierre Jalee in his work. By now sufficient evidence on the behavior of the Eastern-bloc countries (and particularly the Soviet Union) has been accumulated to assert with reasonable confidence that Imperialism and Neo-colonialism are first and foremost expressions of economic exploitation in which considerations of national prestige and interests take precedence over ideological preoccupations.

This raises a more fundamental question with regard to Rodney's work, namely that of the appropriateness of the methodological approach adopted -- Marxist dialectical materialism -- to understand a phenomenon of great complexity occurring in a wide variety of societal, human and cultural environments and circumstances. For one thing, Marxism is not totally immune from the criticisms of Eurocentrism usually levelled at other Western methodological approaches. In any event, even if one accepts the premises of a Marxist methodology, one need not be as dogmatic in its application to the African situation as Rodney is in this case. Probably the most convincing Marxist argument along Rodney's line would be an economic one. However, one is under the impression that the author's formation and personal inclination prevent him from fully exploring this line of argument.

This accounts to some extent for Rodney's tendency to sometimes substitute blunt statements for careful argumentation. For instance, it is difficult to accept without further evidence such statements as "capitalism has always discouraged technological evolution in Africa and blocks Africa's access to its own technology" (p. 118), "... the exploitation of Africa led to multiple technical and organisational developments in Europe" (p. 200) and "The exploitation and the comparative disadvantage are the ingredients of underdevelopment" (p. 261). It should also be pointed out that Rodney's class analysis remains pretty hazy throughout, and that adequate definitions of such concepts as "workers" and "peasants" are nowhere provided.

Most importantly, some of Rodney's contentions, such as "In Africa, there were few slaves and certainly no epoch of slavery" (p. 45) are of dubious historical accuracy. Similarly, it is twisting historical evidence to fit ideological preconceptions to assert, concerning the inter-lacustrine kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara, that "... some form of coercion must also have been used to get the cultivators to produce a surplus for their new lords" (p. 73).

Furthermore, although it is difficult to openly challenge the assertion that capitalism has stifled and distorted indigenous African development, there seems to be some historical evidence, as produced by such authors as A.G. Hopkins and E.A. Brett<sup>8</sup> that capitalism has not had only negative effects on the economic

development of Africa. In particular, trade has been shown to have been rather beneficial to Africa under certain historical circumstances in which an indigenous capitalist class had been allowed to emerge; similarly, the transfer of technology is to be credited to a large extent to the introduction of capitalism on the continent. In addition, one might concede that despite its overwhelmingly negative impact, the colonial experience might have had some positive aspects to it. This is, in any event, a point made by E.A. Brett in an otherwise extremely critical study of colonialism in East Africa.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these shortcomings, and keeping in mind the original purpose of the author, one must agree that Rodney's work is a significant contribution to the emerging literature on African development from an African perspective. Not only does it delve into an area which has been given scant consideration by scholars so far, that of the origins of African underdevelopment and dependency, but it does so, for the first time, from the vantage point of Africa rather than from that of Europe. To the extent that one agrees with the ideological premises of the author (and I certainly do), it presents a fascinating and, ultimately, convincing explanation of the causal relation existing between European development and African underdevelopment. As such, it can be seen as the ideal instrument for the political education of the African student and layman sincerely concerned with the future of their continent and, consequently, deserves the widest possible diffusion among such persons.

Guy Martin  
Department of Political Science  
Indiana University,  
Bloomington

#### Footnotes

1. All references are to this edition.
2. *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.
3. See for instance his pamphlet entitled *The Groundings with my Brothers* (London: Bogle L'Ouverture, 1969).
4. Reviews by Martin A. Klein, in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, VII, 2 (1974), pp. 323-28; and R.H. Green, in *Review of African Political Economy*, 2 (1975), pp. 117-20.

5. A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1973.
6. Stanley J. Hilderbrand, "A New Paradigm in African Studies", UFAHAMU, V, 2 (1974), p. 8.
7. I. Wallerstein, "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XVI, 4 (September 1974), pp. 387-415; Frank and Hobsbawm quoted in E. Laclau, "Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America", *New Left Review*, 67 (1971), pp. 27-8.
8. A.G. Hopkins, *op. cit.*; E.A. Brett, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment in East Africa*; New York: Nok Publishers, 1973.
9. E.A. Brett, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

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GUY MARTIN is a Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science at Indiana University, Bloomington. He is widely published.