Remembering Walter Rodney

The Continuing Relevance of Walter Rodney

In Memory of Prof. Ian Taylor

Professor Ian Taylor's article on the "Continuing Relevance of Walter Rodney" is published posthumously. Prof. Taylor submitted the article for publication in ***Africa Development*** *on November 30th 2020. Though the peer review comments were shared with him, CODESRIA did not receive any response nor a revised version of the article. The silence seemed unusual, since Ian had a previous record of engagement with CODESRIA. His last publication with CODESRIA was an article published in* ***Africa Development****, Vol. XLII, No. 3, 2017 on "The Liberal Peace Security Regimen: A Gramscian Critique of its Application in Africa". His failure to respond to the peer review comments was therefore a cause of concern and the sad news of his illness, hospitalisation and eventual passing on February 22nd 2021 explained it all.*

Ian Taylor's work hoovered in African studies in a way that colleagues and students admired and will continue to appreciate. In his email submitting this article on Walter Rodney for publication, he pointed out his strong believe in Walter Rodney's political methodology and Africa-centred epistemology which he noted will continue to have relevance in any study of Africa. Ian was unapologetically radical in his academic pursuits and his engagement was tied to the activism that informed this radicalism. With wide ranging interest in Africa, especially in Botswana where he taught at the University of Botswana for a while, Ian's interest started and expanded to other regions of the world without abandoning the African connection. He started in Hong Kong, for instance, and soon became a critical voice in China–Africa relations, his interest, of course going beyond the current avalanche of studies inspired largely by recent China–Africa relations that are driven by Belt and Road Initiative and encouraged by pilgrimages by African leaders to the Beijing Summit under the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) framework.

Ian had multiple institutional affiliations over the period of his comparatively short career. He however published with CODESRIA, something that identified him not just with the Council but also with Africa and Africans. His 2005 co-edited study ***The Potentiality of 'Developmental States' in Africa: Botswana and Uganda Compared*** *is an example. His review titled "Laughter as the best Medicine: Coping with the Nigerian Tragicomedy" published in CODESRIA's* ***Africa Review of Books****, Vol. 14, 2018, was another example of his continuing engagement with academic work on the continent. This is important. The Council has pushed for African-centered perspectives on Africa. This focus often rubs non-African and non-black scholars of Africa the wrong way because the nature of knowledge production and the division of labour within it that make it almost abnormal for Africans to make this basic claim that is treated as normal for other areas of study. Ian was comfortable with this politics and it is for this reason that we share in his sad passing on. We hope this last article attests to the claims we have made of Ian and speaks to the value he attached to progressive politics that Walter Rodney advanced.*

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Although Walter Rodney was murdered thirty years ago, eight years after he published his classic book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (hereafter *HEUA*) (Rodney 1972), this Guyanese intellectual's thought is as relevant today as it was when the book first came out. With Africa now experiencing serious economic difficulties, after falsely being said to be 'Rising' in the mid-2000s (for a critique, see Taylor 2016), the structural reasons for the continent's stagnation remain as per Rodney's analysis. In his book, Rodney not only discussed how Africa had been subjugated and then exploited by European imperialists, but argued that this had led to the underdevelopment of the continent. *HEUA* became extremely influential, but also contentious, particularly in the Western Africanist academy dominated by non-Africans. When the book was published, one review went so far as to state that:

> Dr. Walter Rodney, a historian at Dar es Salaam University College, has written an important book. It is not important in the ordinary fly leaf publicity of the white *capitalist* sell books/ make money publishing world, but *important* as an extension in the tradition of *The Wretched of the Earth*, *Black Reconstruction*, *The Black Jacobins*, *Native Son*, *Pan Africanism*, *Communism* and other landmarks pointing the way to the future. (Chaka 1973: 56)

The argument of this article is that aside from Rodney's solid political economy framework, his epistemological approach in *HEUA* may be seen to fit with the later development of Africa-centred, decolonial frameworks and that a re-evaluation of Rodney's immense contribution may be fruitful in light of his epistemology (and methodology). *HEUA* was pioneering in that it was among the first works to bring a new assessment to post-colonial Africa and the problematique of underdevelopment, and its approach consciously put the African experience front and centre (Howison 2011). Rodney's analysis went beyond the heretofore conventional (as per the dominant Western academy's) consideration of the study of African (and Africans') development and beyond the Western canon (Bloom 1994). Underdevelopment, as per Rodney's critical concept, suggested a process that deviated from the trajectory Africa might have followed had it not been brutally incorporated into the global capitalist system by the Europeans. Indeed, underdevelopment, according to Rodney, was 'not the absence of development, because every people have developed in one way or another and to a greater or lesser extent. Underdevelopment makes sense only as a means of comparing levels of development. It is very much tied to the fact that human social development has been uneven and from a strictly economic viewpoint some human groups have advanced further by producing more and becoming wealthier' (Rodney 1972).

With underdevelopment 'there are two aspects, two sides of underdevelopment: the basically external, international aspect, which from the historical point of view of the emergence of the present state is the primary aspect; and the internal aspect, which from the point of view of future development is increasingly important' (Szentes 1971: 163). In short, 'poverty [is] not the result of some historical game of chance in which [Africa] happened to be the losers; it [is] the result of a set of economic relationships, rooted in the colonial era, that [has] served to enrich a minority by impoverishing the majority' (Adamson 2013: 12). Furthermore, Rodney noted that European rapacity in Africa had denied the people of the continent power:

> 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 defend one's interests and, if necessary, to impose one's will by any means available. In relations between peoples, the question of power determines manoeuvrability in bargaining, the extent to which one people respect the interests of another, and eventually, the extent to which a people survive as a physical and cultural entity. When one society finds itself forced to relinquish power entirely to another society that in itself is a form of underdevelopment.

The colonial enterprise structured African societies so that they supplied exports 'on the best possible terms, from the point of view of the mother country', which delivered only a minimal and declining return to the local workforce (Amin 1972: 524). This was underdevelopment in action.

Rodney's Intellectual Development

In 1960, Walter Rodney entered the University of the West Indies (UWI) at Mona, Jamaica, to learn history. He graduated three years later with a first-class Honours degree and secured a scholarship to pursue postgraduate work in African History at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. There is little question that his decision to study African History was spurred by a desire to challenge the omnipresent Eurocentric historiography at the time (see Morrissey 1976; Campbell 1981). It was at SOAS that 'Rodney confronted the perception that history was at the core a reactionary discipline, characterized largely by archives and documents, with a natural bias towards the elite and linear thinking' (Vaught 2015: 8).

Equally, given the contemporary milieu, Rodney became acquainted with the principles of Black Power and Marxist thought. His connections in London with C.L.R. James later reverberated throughout Rodney's life and academic work (see Henry 2013). In London, Rodney attached himself to a study group that met recurrently in James' home to read and debate Marxism. Rodney recounts that these sessions gave him the opportunity 'to acquire a knowledge of Marxism, a more precise understanding of the Russian revolution, and of historical formulation', while developing 'a certain sense of historical analysis' (Rodney 1990: 28).

By the time he completed his PhD in 1966, his intellectual development had been further influenced by two noteworthy happenings: first, the post-Marcus Garvey resurgence of Black Power all over the Diaspora and the escalating Marxist critique among black radicals and militants against imperialism and neo-colonialism (see Bogues 2003; Waters 2018). Whatever the tendency, the dominant supposition was that confronting racial injustice and neocolonialism in Africa was *the* agenda. Thus it can be said that Rodney's analysis of the African situation, as exemplified in *HEUA*, was the outcome of these interlinked dynamics (see Lewis 1998).

Rodney taught at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) in Tanzania between 1966 and 1967 and from 1969 to 1974. This was a period in which UDSM was perhaps the most influential university in Africa, with an intellectual ferment that was legendary (see Tandon 1982; Shivji 1993; Hirji 2010). Rodney threw himself into the debates (Shivji 1980). However, in 1968, Rodney ended his initial spell in Tanzania to teach at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica and it was during this time that *The Groundings with my Brothers* was published (Rodney 1969), a culmination of his dialogues with Rastafarians on Black Power (see Campbell 1987). *Groundings* may be seen as an effort to link Marxism and pan-Africanism into a single emancipatory movement (Ledgister 2008). Under intense pressure from the Jamaican and American intelligence services (see West 2005), the book got Rodney banned from Jamaica (see Gonsalves 1979; Payne 1983; Lewis 2000; West 2008), but *Groundings* became viewed as an exposition of Rodney's ideas concerning the functionality of an identity, anchored in history, for the liberation of black people in the Diaspora (Bogues 2009). Rodney subsequently returned to UDSM in 1969 as a Professor of History, staying until 1974. It was during this time that his magnum opus, *HEUA*, was published. *HEUA* integrated a Marxist perspective and an Africa-centred historiography to critically examine the destructive effect of Western cultural domination on African identity and self-definition. The historical materialism in *HEUA* was largely equalised with an appreciation of race in the wider background of cultural imperialism from the West (Chung 2012).

In 1974, Rodney returned to his native Guyana to assume a position as a professor at the University of Guyana, but the autocratic Guyanese government under Forbes Burnham thwarted his appointment. Rodney then became ever more involved in political activism, founding the Working People's Alliance to oppose Burnham (see Westmaas 2009). Harassment followed, and in 1979 Rodney was arrested and charged with arson after two state offices were found burned (Teelucksingh 2016: 171–185). On 13 June 1980, Rodney was assassinated in a car bomb attack, one month after returning from Zimbabwe's independence celebrations. He was survived by Patricia, his wife, and three children.[1]

Blame the Africans

Rodney's *HEUA* was a much-needed corrective to the then dominant 'modernisation thesis', which came from the United States and sought to influence how Africa was seen and saw itself. Owing its intellectual origins to the work of Darwin, Durkheim and Weber, and crystallised by the sociologist Parsons (1951), it was the American economist, Walter W. Rostow and his *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960), who crafted this agenda. The intellectual history of Africa in defining itself had to engage in a continuous struggle between the broad vision encapsulated within Modernisation Theory (which effectively sees Africa and

Africans as a problem to overcome) and more critical postures emanating from scholars sympathetic to the continent (for an early review of the literature, see Chilcote 1984). This theme has been current throughout the discourses associated with Western interventions in Africa, whether in the New International Economic Order (NIEO) or Structural Adjustment Programmes. Rostow's thesis may in fact be seen as providing an intellectual foundation to the story of Africa's debate with its erstwhile 'partners'.

Modernisation Theory drew from Durkheim the belief that the world was divided into two broad kinds of social formations: the 'modern' and the 'traditional' (Durkheim 1984 [1893]). In contrast to the modern, traditional societies are backward-looking (if not primitive), and lack the dynamism required for economic 'success'. Traditional social formations are dominated by religious authority, which is frequently linked via a metaphysical cosmology to a rigid form of social structures predicated upon status based on inheritance. Such societies preclude the type of social mobility, or rather, the opportunities for social mobility that would spur innovative and efficient economic activity. Organised along lines of kinship, they also remain isolated from one another (Lerner 1958). At the same time, such vertically arranged societies allow for little control over arbitrary or capricious abuses of authority. According to the Rostow-inspired thesis, such characteristics were the hallmarks of societies that primarily revolve around agricultural production and rural life, which typified Africa. All of this is cast in a way that, of course, portrays Africans in a negative light.

In contrast, modern societies emerged from such traditional formations after going through a complex process of development, which was said to include the decline of magic as a basis for political authority (the demise of the 'divine right of kings', for instance) and a concomitant secularisation of wider society (Bauer 1971). With the Age of Reason, associated with the Enlightenment, came a spur for science and technology and an attempt to 'explain' the world scientifically. At the same time, reward systems based on merit rather than inheritance fostered a climate of incentives for innovation and efficiency (McClelland 1961; Hagen 1962). Associated with this broad historic thrust were a limited form of government and the rule of law defined constitutionally. This social order served to enshrine property relations and consciously reified capitalist modes of production. At the same time, a capitalist 'work ethic' à la Weber stimulated economic progress (see Jomo and Reinert 2005).

Broadly speaking, the modernisation thesis holds that if Africa is to follow the North into development and higher (i.e. Northern) standards of living, then it has to seek to replicate the North's historical trajectory, with particular emphasis on the development of an entrepreneurial class (Roxborough 1979: 16). In essence, the main foil to African development is cast as the 'character' of Africa's own societies. This retains powerful purchase in certain constituencies in the North: the infamous front page of *The Economist* (13 May 2000), declaring Africa to be 'The Hopeless Continent', blamed Africa's woes on its culture. In this trope, only by a deepened exposure to the economies and 'superior' cultures of the West can the traditional social formations and values that 'hold Africa back' be broken down.

Such a view holds that as modern forms of society begin to develop in Africa (through interaction with the West) they will foster the growth of a more dynamic, efficient and explicitly capitalist mode of production and social organisation on the continent. That this is an inherently Eurocentric vision is apparent, and needs little comment: it was at the very core of one influential modernisation theorist (Eisenstadt 1966). And as Mazama (1998) noted, it was an exercise in self-glorification. However, its staying power in popular consciousness in Western societies has been remarkable.

Rodney's Contribution

The importance of Rodney's Africa-centred approach is that it underscores the fact that African peoples were deliberately removed from history by racist Europeans and denied even their humanity. This is what is known as the 'coloniality of being' (Maldonado-Torres 2007), which is the organised denial of humanity of those who became the victims of enslavement and colonisation. For Africans in particular, the denial of their humanity was a key tool in their subjugation and shoved them into a subhuman category, a position of non-being (Fanon 1968). It amounted to inferiorisation, i.e. 'the conscious, deliberate and systematic process … to mold specific peoples within that system … into "functional inferiors"' (Welsing 1974: 85).

In his pioneering work on Eurocentrism, Samir Amin (1985) argued that the belief in European superiority strengthened with the development of capitalism and ideas from the Enlightenment from the eighteenth century onwards, as

European economies began to rush ahead of the rest of the world. Prior to this, Europeans had not seen themselves as inherently superior to other peoples. Europe's ruling class paradoxically combined enthusiasm for their own countries' competency in the burgeoning capitalist economy with democratic ideas of *fraternité* and *egalité*. However, when confronted with the brutal realities of the slave trade and wars of conquest, 'The culture of the Enlightenment was unable to reconcile the fact of this superiority with its universalist ambition. On the contrary, it gradually drifted towards racism as an explanation for the contrast between it and other cultures' (ibid: 58).

It was at this moment that notions developed that somehow Europe (and Europeans) were fundamentally more dynamic than other people. This was cast in evolutionary terms:

> It was the exceptional historical sense underlying Hegel's manner of reasoning which distinguished it from that of all other philosophers. However abstract and idealist the form employed, yet his evolution of ideas runs always parallel with the evolution of universal history, and the latter was indeed supposed to be only the proof of the former. Although this reversed the actual relation and stood it on its head, yet the real content was invariably incorporated in his philosophy … He was the first to try to demonstrate that there is an evolution, an intrinsic coherence in history … This monumental conception of history pervades the *Phänomenologies*, *Asthetik* and *Geschichte der Philosophie* (Engels 1989 [1859]: 224).

With this evolutionary framework and the belief that Europe personified History, Hegel felt able to assert that:

> At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is not a historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit … What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History. (Hegel 1956 [1824]: 99)

Thus dismissed by *Geist*, African history, as per Hegel, was nothing but a purposeless set of barbaric actions. Lest this view be waved away as belonging to the past, consider the comments in 1969 of then-Regius Professor of History at the University of Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper: 'There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness'; and that Africa's past was merely 'the unedifying gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe'.[2] More recently, and more publicly, was Nicolas Sarkozy's 2007 comment (in Senegal!) that:

> The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history ... They have never really launched themselves into the future. The African peasant only knew the eternal renewal of time, marked by the endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words. In this realm of fancy ... there is neither room for human endeavour nor the idea of progress. (quoted by Ba 2007)

Such tropes are nothing short of the methodical denigration of peer structures of knowledge (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). As Adeleke (2000: 38) reminds us,

> European rejection and caricaturing of Africa, which predated Roper, was meant to legitimise Europe's impending rape and denouement of the continent. The alleged backward and primitive character of pre-European Africa justified the enslavement and sale of Africans across the Atlantic.

The comparison between an African-centred understanding of history and the racist Eurocentric framework could not be more stark (see Keita 1974). After all, as Henri Moniot commented on then-dominant readings of history: 'There was Europe, and that was what constituted history' (1974: 106).

Outside of Afrocentrism and some postcolonial/decolonial research, the writing of history has been at the centre of a hegemonic project based on European supremacism, with the European experience taken as a given, as per Modernisation Theory. Everything else is a diffusion from Europe (see Amin 1985). Thus:

> History became part of a broader academic culture designed to facilitate European control and domination of non-Europeans. Knowledge was carefully structured, and access to it strictly controlled, all in a bid to strengthen European hegemony. Knowledge became a veritable weapon for creating and nurturing in Africans and blacks in diaspora a mental and psychological disposition to acknowledge White superiority. (Adeleke 2000: 38)

Rodney's work challenged these distortions (see Wallerstein 1986). His approach put the African location as the methodology while rejecting the subaltern place to which it has been conferred by Eurocentric scholars (see Monteiro-Ferreira 2009). This is somewhat redolent of Cabral's concept of the African peoples' 'return to History' after an absence due to the suppression of their history by imperialism (Cabral 1973: 50).

Asante asserted that 'the placing of African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior' (Asante 1987: 6) clearly would incorporate key elements of *HEUA*, particularly chapters two and three ('How Africa Developed Before the Coming of the Europeans up to the 15th Century' and 'Africa's Contribution to European Capitalist Development: The Pre-Colonial Period' respectively). As a method of intellectual reflection (see Kershaw 1992) and action in which the significance of African interests, values and outlooks prevail (Asante 2001: 3) this approach is reflected in these significant sections of *HEUA*. Notably, Rodney sets up his stall early in chapter two, with a quote from J. E. Casely Hayford, a Gold Coast nationalist: 'Before even the British came into relations with our people, we were a developed people, having our own institutions, having our own ideas of government' (Rodney 1972: 51). Rodney notes that 'The moment that the topic of the pre-European African past is raised, many individuals are concerned for various reasons to know about the existence of African "civilisations". Mainly, this stems from a desire to make comparisons with European "civilisations"' (Rodney 1972: 53). In other words, in such dominant epistemologies, Africa cannot be studied without anchoring it in Eurocentrism. Rodney rejected this.

Indeed, in the first two chapters of *HEUA*, Rodney discusses Africa and its peoples before the transatlantic slave trade, demonstrating an abundant and multifaceted complex of interconnected civilisations at a high level of development. Like elsewhere, some societies centred around a basic division of labour and were communal in nature (Rodney discusses hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari Desert, the Kaffa cultivators, Galla pastoralists, as well as the Bozo fisherman and Fulani herdsmen). Equally, such groups often lived together with relatively more developed societies, with the Benin Kingdom being an example. The weighty commerce and advanced division of labour in Beninese society laid the foundations for an embarrassment of riches in arts and culture, including the much-lauded bronze heads (subsequently stolen by the British in 1897). Of course, to the north, the magnificent civilisation of Mali, with Timbuktu as its capital, was a focal point for education across the continent and beyond. Rodney also discusses Great Zimbabwe, a monument to the history and impressiveness of city building in precolonial Africa: 'One of the principal structures at Great Zimbabwe was some 300 feet long and 220 feet broad, with the walls being 30 feet high and 20 feet thick' (Rodney 1972: 77).

Today, the need to somehow demonstrate (even 'justify') that Africa had a civilisation looks somewhat passé. But we must consider the times in which Rodney was writing: 'It was not until the decade of the 1970s that African and Africanist scholars began sustained intellectual counter-attack' against the dominant view of a continent with no precolonial history or sophistication (Adeleke 2000: 37). The work of A. Adu Boahen and Basil Davidson may be cited in this regard (Boahen 1964, 1987; Davidson 1961, 1964, 1977, 1998). In this sense, Rodney had to deal with the same sort of prejudices that the Senegalese scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop, had to, whose work on Africa as the cradle of humanity and civilisation (Diop 1954, 1960a, 1960b, 1962) was met with outright hostility,[3] even hatred, from Western scholars (see Van Sertima 1992; Gray 1999; Asante 2007).[4] This was precisely because Diop dared challenge the dominant racist historiography of Africa: his work marked a rupture from this view (Andjembe 1989).

As with any Kuhnian paradigm shift (Kuhn 1962), Diop's new concept of African history had to overcome extant positions (Clarke 1989). Notably, Rodney's work also suffered the same fate when published (see Hirji 2017). Thus, one contemporary review asserted that 'Some scholars may be disturbed by the pro-Marxist and anti-West bias of How Europe Underdeveloped Africa' (Tooker 1975: 549), while another worried that:

> Rodney's book will trouble many professional scholars more because of its tone than its substance. Unlike those Marxists who write for other scholars, Rodney goes out of his way to be abrasive. There are constant references to 'bourgeois apologists' and 'capitalist parasites'. (Klein 1974: 323)

Notably, critique of Rodney often focused on his 'style' and not the substance of his arguments, something which black scholars continue to face (see Jackson 2000).

Rodney's goal in his methodical discussion of the complex precolonial African societies was not to offer up some mythological utopic vision of the continent but rather to demonstrate that the continent's diverse sociological character was not particularly behind that of medieval Europe in terms of development prior to the European onslaught and that a recognition of this reality has to be at the centre of analysis when examining the effect of imperialism on Africa. This is precisely what Amin, in his critique of Eurocentrism, also argued. Rodney noted that when the

Dutch first visited Benin City, they saw in it a mirror of their own conurbations. Rodney quotes one contemporary account that:

> The town seems to be very great … The king's palace is a collection of buildings which occupy as much space as the town of Harlem, and which is enclosed with walls. There are numerous apartments for the Prince's ministers and fine galleries, most of which are as big as those on the Exchange at Amsterdam. (Rodney 1972: 83)

Furthermore, Rodney's work did not aim to exchange one group of myths (white superiority) with another (the splendour of the African past) but to centre ordinary Africans and their accomplishments. In his work on African pasts, Rodney was clear about the need for a historiography that encompassed not only the kings and aristocrats but also the common people:

> Even within those kingdoms [Egypt, Kush, Ethiopia, Ghana, etc.] the historical accounts often concentrate narrowly on the behaviour of elite groups and dynasties; we need to portray the elements of African everyday life and to comprehend the culture of all Africans irrespective of whether they were resident in the empire of Mali or an Ibo village. In reconstructing African civilisations, the concern is to indicate that African social life had meaning and value, and that the African past is one with which the Black man in the Americas can identify with pride. (Rodney 1969: 53).

One way Rodney highlighted this was in his discussion of the material culture of Africa. Contrary to dominant views regarding precolonial Africa, local manufacturers created items of comparable, if not superior, quality to those of Europe, due to developments in native forge technology. Indeed, smiths in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa were producing steels of a better quality and grade than those of their peers in Europe (Thornton 1990). As Rodney was keen to point out, before the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade, a relative level of parity between Africa and Europe existed. The consequences of the transatlantic slave trade, however, put a halt on such developments. The colossal loss to the labour force in the regions from which Africans were stolen meant that local industries were debilitated, with European products flowing into and thus underdeveloping the economy. Africa became increasingly shaped to favour the interests of Western capitalism, and African industries were stunted (Williams 1944).

The foundations for this were, inter alia, firstly, the colonial economies' forced integration into global capitalism in a subservient arrangement so that the colonial economy was defined not by the needs of the native populations, but by the demands and concerns of the economy of the metropole and its ruling class, often under monopoly conditions. The underlying logic and driving force of capitalism and capital is the accumulation of profits; in the words of Marx, the 'boundless drive for enrichment' and the 'passionate chase after value' (Marx 1976 [1867]: 254).

From this scenario, unequal exchange and disarticulation resulted. With regard to Africa, Samir Amin (1974 2010) has demonstrated that a dependency on foreign capital investments has caused structural distortions of the economies of the continent. For Africa, problematically, the economic structures that emerged from the colonial period as a result of the world division of labour distorted the continent in such a way as to create obstacles to development (Amin 1974). Amin, in this respect, discusses articulated and disarticulated economies. Articulated economies are those that possess multiple sectors interrelated to each other so that development in one sector stimulates development in another sector. This situation characterises developed economies. On the other hand, disarticulated economies refer to underdeveloped nations where economic sectors are not closely interrelated. Hence, development in one sector is unable to stimulate development in the other sector (Amin 1974). As Shivji notes, structural disarticulation is where Africa exhibits a 'disarticulation between the structure of production and the structure of consumption. What is produced is not consumed and what is consumed is not produced' (Shivji 2009: 59). Rather, the economies are oriented outwards:

> One finds within each colony the same disjunction, the same disaggregation of the constituent parts of a colonised economy. Instead, the linkages are with the metropolitan economy, and are determined exclusively by the latter in its own interest—an interest which proves incompatible with the independence and any real development of the Third World. (Rodney 1972: 29–30)

To demonstrate his point, Rodney wrote of the clothmaking industry in Africa:

> When European cloth became dominant on the African market, it meant that African producers were cut off from the increasing demand. The craft producers either abandoned their tasks … or they continued on the same small hand-worked instruments to create styles and pieces for localised markets. Therefore there was what can be called 'technological arrest' or stagnation or even regres-

> sion. … The abandonment of traditional iron smelting in most parts of Africa is probably the most important instance of technological repression. (Rodney 1972: 119).

As Rodney developed his argument, development assumes 'a capacity for self-sustaining growth' (ibid.), but the transatlantic slave trade prevented this, with well-known consequences. Rodney's data demonstrated how population growth in Africa was almost flat (between 1650 to 1900 it rose a mere 20 million, from 100 million to 120 million, compared to Asia's population growth of 257 million to 857 million during the same period) (Rodney 1972: 110). The later research of Nathan Nunn (2008) from Harvard University vindicated Rodney's assessment of the effects of the slave trade. In his study, Nunn demonstrates that if the slave trade had not occurred, then 72 per cent of the average income gap between Africa and the rest of the world would not exist today and that 99 per cent of the income gap between Africa and other underdeveloped countries would not exist. Compare that to J. D. Fage's assertion in his *Introduction to the History of West Africa* that:

> [T]he volume and distribution of the export slave trade do not suggest that the loss of population and other effects of the export of labour to the Americas need have had universally damaging effects on the development of West Africa. Rather, it is suggested, West African rulers and merchants reacted to the demand with economic reasoning, and used it to strengthen streams of economic and political development that were already current before the Atlantic slave trade began. (Fage 1969: 404)[5]

Rodney debunked Fage's argument in an early article of his based on his PhD thesis, subsequently published in 1970 as *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast: 1545–1800* (Rodney 1970):

> In one sense, it is preferable to ignore such rubbish and isolate our youth from its insults; but unfortunately one of the aspects of current African underdevelopment is that the capitalist publishers and bourgeois scholars dominate the scene and help mould opinions the world over. It is for that reason that writing of the type which justifies the trade in slaves has to be exposed as racist bourgeois propaganda, having no connection with reality or logic. It is a question not merely of history but of present day liberation struggle in Africa. (Rodney 1966: 117)

As Rodney showed, the (forced) African contribution to European development involved key sectors that already existed, such as shipping, insurance, establishment of merchant companies, agriculture, technology and the manufacture of machinery. These facts are ignored in Eurocentric accounts of the history of both Africa and Europe. Rodney's work is critical because:

> Rodney contended that since African history had been used as a weapon of domination, keepizng Africans at home and blacks in diaspora, ignorant of the glories of their past, and obscuring their true identity, it was the responsibility of black intellectuals to reverse this trend through critical researches into African history and culture. The result would illuminate the antiquity and wealth of civilisation in Africa, and reverse the psychological effect of Eurocentric propaganda. (Adeleke 2000: 44)

The last part of *HEUA* focuses on the vicious colonisation of the continent. The legacy of slavery, the devastation of African industry, the contraction of productive technology, the stoppage of much intra-African commerce, the dislocation of African societies and the exploitation of the continent's resources (both human and natural) all nullified Africa's ability for autocentric growth while offering a colossal enhancement to capitalist development in Europe. *HEUA* is truly a pioneering piece of scholarship, with great empirical rigour. It is also a book of incalculable poise and poignancy.

Beyond *HEUA*, as mentioned above, in *The Groundings with my Brothers*, Rodney reflects on his position as an intellectual in relation to the movements for Black Power taking place in the West Indies at the time. The book urged intellectuals to attack the racist distortions of imperialism in the academy, challenge social myths especially prevalent in a multiracial, multiethnic Caribbean and Latin America, and identify with the people. A gathering of his public lectures held by Rodney in Jamaica and at the Congress of Black Writers in Montréal (see Austin 2007), *Groundings* provides a pedagogical agenda for intellectuals struggling to undo the epistemological misrepresentations of imperialism. And like HEUA, *Groundings* can be seen within the ambit of an Africa-centred framework, given that 'grounding' is more than just a method of training, education or knowledge production, but a position that centres Africa and the African experience. *Groundings* established the consequence of what Cedric Robinson (1983) denoted as black radical historiography and compels scholars to contemplate what is and what is not 'acceptable' (and why) in the politicised schemas of academia in which all intellectual work is situated.

In summary, the importance of Rodney's historical method is that it challenges the normative and hegemonic (i.e. racist) portrayal of Africa and Africans and marks a break from such a milieu. Thus, reading *Groundings* today requires that readers question pre-established concepts of African history. *Walter Rodney Speaks: The Making of an African Intellectual* (Rodney 1990), a posthumous collection of his writings in which Rodney discusses his political and intellectual development and deliberates on the role of the African intellectual, is similar within this generalised thrust to critically engage in what might be seen as an African-centred reflexivity. As Mkabela (2005) notes, reflexivity in qualitative research is harmonious with the foundations underpinning this approach, in which scholars are anticipated to be 'centered' or located as an agent rather than as the 'Other' (Mkabela 2005).

Conclusion

Walter Rodney's work sought to centre Africa and Africans in any analysis of the political economy of the continent. His careful historiography was infused with an epistemology that melded Historical Materialism with Africa-centred analysis. Given that there is now a growing awareness of just how Eurocentric political economy and international political economy are (see Hobson 2013; Mantz 2019), this is important for a critical analysis of Africa today. Indeed,

> Rodney is relevant today because his methods still enhance the development of a framework with which we continue to use for making judgments about the conditions facing African people throughout the Diaspora. In hindsight, Rodney's mastery of the materialist tradition never resulted, as is too often the case, in a denial of racial identity and a role for nationalism in Pan-Africanism. He recognised Black or cultural nationalism as basic elements that stood at the core of African people's search for self-definition, self-determination, and human dignity. (Young 2008: 494)

As Rodney demonstrated in *HEUA*, it is axiomatic that colonial rule disrupted the natural evolutionary course of Africa's socioeconomic and cultural development and thereby disastrously undermined its economies (Rodney 1972: 278). Before imperialism, as Rodney notes, parts of Africa were more developed than parts of Europe. It was the introduction of European rule that led to the decay of African institutions, making them unworkable and twisted: from civilisation to barbarism, as Diop (1991) may have put it.

To reiterate, Rodney's work points out that the colonial experience socially isolated African communities from one another and devastated the continent. In Africa today, countries like Nigeria have been 'independent' since the 1960s, but they continue to have a subordinate and dependent relationship with the West (and, increasingly, with countries such as China). These countries, termed 'post-colonies' by Achille Mbembe (2001), have undergone a process of decolonisation, but colonial powers still exert a powerful influence (Feldner 2018: 516). Given the ongoing conditions of unfettered neoliberalism under globalisation, Rodney's work remains ever relevant (see Canterbury 2001).

Finally, Rodney's work highlighted a key problem for Africans in that an unconscious adoption of Eurocentrism naturalises the Western experience, thus obfuscating (if not destroying) African agency. This has meant that Africans' 'failure to recognise the roots of such ideas in the European cultural ethos has led [them], willingly or unwillingly, to agree to footnote status in the White man's book. [They] thus find [themselves] relegated to the periphery, the margin, of the European experience' (Mazama 2003: 50). If the current decolonisation movement aims to challenge the supposed universality of Western epistemologies and the problem with their unthinking application to the study of Africa, then it is the contention of this article that African scholars should consider anew Rodney's work and incorporate aspects of his approach in further research.

Notes

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1. For an overview of Rodney and information about the International Commission of Inquiry into Rodney's murder, see https://www.walterrodneyfoundation.org/.
2. The statement was initially made during a series of lectures at the University of Sussex, which were transmitted by BBC Television. The lectures then appeared in print in *The Listener* in 1963 and then became a book: Roper 1965. For a discussion of Roper's racism, see Fuglestad 1992.
3. Note that in 1954 Diop's doctoral thesis on the Egyptian origin of African civilisations at the Université de Paris could not find an examining committee willing to examine it and it was thus rejected.
4. The controversy around Diop's contribution to the *General History of Africa* (UNESCO)

being a case in point. Diop's work generated such indignation that a special conference was even organised in 1974 in Cairo to debate it. The report, written by Jean Devisse, was published in full in volume two of the *General History*—see Maurel, 2014.

5. Note that this was not some arcane debate, but went to the heart of accurate knowledge creation about Africa: J.D. Fage was later a general editor of UNESCO's *The Cambridge History of Africa vol. 2: From c.500 BC to AD 1050*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Throughout the whole process of putting together the eight-volume collection, African scholars had to struggle to be heard. To be fair to Fage, he did pioneer, alongside Roland Oliver, the discipline of African history in the West, launching the *Journal of African History* in 1960, the first history journal to embrace a multidisciplinary approach to Africa's historical past, particularly the pre-colonial period, with articles by archaeologists, anthropologists and linguists, alongside historians.

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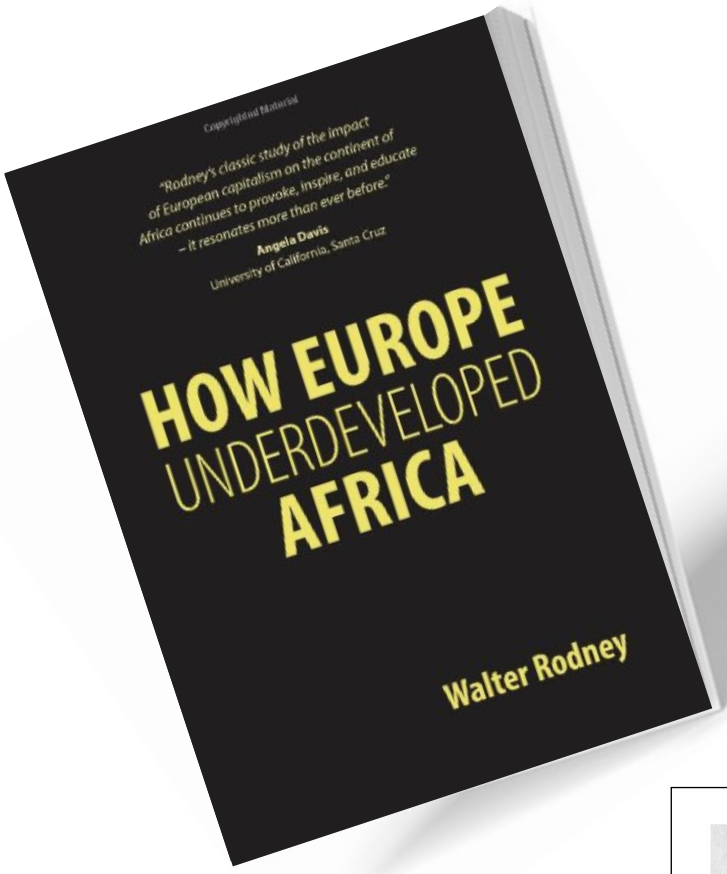

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